PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

82-year-old Uncle Wong asks Hong Kong police: Why?

TURKEY: Kicking out foreign pastors
CALIFORNIA: Foster care to homelessness
ARIZONA: Kissing library fines goodbye
A Biblical solution to health care

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— Cameron & Roanna, members since 2017

Monthly costs

Ranges based on age, household size, and membership level

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ON THE COVER: Uncle Wong of Protect the Children confronts police in Hong Kong; photo by Kiran Ridley

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I like problems that have an obvious right or wrong solution: The answer is clear, I make a decision, and I’m done.

Trouble is, these kinds of easy problems tend never to show up.

That’s frequently the case for our journalistic team at WORLD. We occasionally see simple stories, in which the options are starkly opposed, and the right choice is apparent. Occasionally, but not often.

Life doesn’t give us many black/white, right/wrong, 2+2=4 questions. Most of life’s questions involve a lot of gray. Most of the stories WORLD covers involve complexities and complications, and often the more digging we do, the more complex and complicated the stories become.

Politics exacerbates the problem, because for most of us, and for most issues, we have only two choices. Implicitly, we recognize that no political choice perfectly addresses all the complexities of every issue, so we use expressions like “the lesser of two evils” to refer to our decision-making process.

With complex political issues, we will almost always have to resort to that kind of decision.

We get in trouble when we try to oversimplify a complex issue, whether at home or in business or in our church congregations. We like to offer a definitive “yes” or “no” on every question, but it is hardly ever that simple.

Of course, if it were, then we wouldn’t need to turn to God and His Word for wisdom, and we wouldn’t need to “forbear with one another” as we work through problems. Complicated questions surround the rearing of our children, the life of our churches, the focus of our time and energy, and our engagement in civic issues. All of these urge us to seek God and trust his wisdom, and to extend grace to our brothers and sisters as they do the same.
Not since the Civil War, some thoughtful observers are saying, has our nation been so divided. Never so polarized. Never with so many of its citizens set so bitterly against each other.

Since I wasn’t around back then, it’s a little hard for me to compare. But over the last three or four years, I’ve seen enough emotional yelling, unrestrained table pounding, and enraged blame-shifting to know that something more than typical politics is at work. Or just look at your calendar. There are still 13 months to go before the next presidential election—but we’re going at it as if we were in the last week of the campaign.

And it’s not just in the sanctuaries of electoral politics that you’ll find all this ruckus. The exchange spills over, naturally, to the news media. From there, it jumps into the worlds of entertainment, music, and even sports.

What concerns me most, though, is the manner in which this to-the-death squabble has invaded the walls of so many of our local churches. Drop in during what we used to call “fellowship hour,” and you’ll find anything but fellowship. Sometimes it’s been just good, vigorous discussion. But it’s getting more and more animated—and it’s the animation that scares me. When that energetic discussion turns into insults and abuse, truth and integrity are no longer the victors. Satan wins that round.

Let me describe four different congregational types, strictly out of my own experience and imagination. You’ll have to decide for yourself whether your own local church fits any of these profiles.

Congregation A steers clear of anything resembling political involvement. Whether from its pulpit, its Christian education program, its teaching of its youth, or its informal discussion (remember the “fellowship hall”?), it diligently follows half of the ancient proverb: “We just don’t talk about religion and politics here.” It’s not a formal prohibition, but informally, it’s pretty consistently observed.

Congregation B is bolder. Under the heading of “Biblical Worldview,” its leaders don’t hesitate to bring up subjects like abortion, care for the environment, or immigration. They may differ with one another on the applicability of specific Biblical sources, and they may not all come to exactly the same conclusions. But they believe such Bible-based teachings are available to us, even if it may take some hard work to pry them loose. The goal in this category is to equip congregants with thoughtful conclusions on a variety of topics, so that those people can—either individually or in small-group “fellowship”—take their conclusions into the public marketplace of ideas.

Congregation C is even more specific. It may or may not take time and effort to equip its people in the development of a thoughtful Biblical worldview. No matter. The leaders of Congregation C decide for everyone which political positions and measures ought to be enacted—and they rally the forces needed to bring about such action. “Vote for Proposition X,” they say.

Congregation D takes the next logical step by endorsing specific candidates for various offices. A Sunday morning pastoral prayer in such a church won’t just include a minimal request that God would oversee the work of civic leaders, as instructed by the Apostle Paul, but will regularly go beyond that to ask God to bless the good guys (by name)—and punish the bad guys (by name)—at next Tuesday’s election. (Action like that, of course, puts at jeopardy that church’s tax exempt status with the IRS, and ultimately jeopardizes the integrity of the tax returns of all the church’s members. Churches like that need to take care to inform their members of such possible consequences.)

So here’s the challenge. How do we fulfill our roles as church members without letting our gatherings degenerate into nothing more than meetings of a political precinct? How do we bring specialized spiritual equipment to our next discussion of Donald Trump—so we don’t beat up on each other in the “fellowship hall”? How do we resist our culture’s propensity (enhanced by too many government leaders) to fill every conversation with ugliness and insults?

In short, how do we exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace,” etc.) so that when onlookers see God’s people talking about their political differences, it’s in an altogether Biblical and constructive tone?
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War gaming

Turkish armored vehicles take part in a joint patrol with U.S. forces near Tal Abyad in Syria. President Trump days later announced that he would pull U.S. troops away from the border between Turkey and Syria. On Oct. 9, Turkey launched attacks on Kurdish areas in Syria.

BADERKHAN AHMAD/AP
Everyone a target

EVEN AMID A DIVIDED NATION, CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT DESPAIR  by Marvin Olasky

In the climax of Witness (1985), a corrupt police chief holds a gun on Harrison Ford’s character amid a group of innocent Amish bystanders. Ford asks, “What are you going to do, Paul? Kill me? Him? The woman?”

I suspect a lot of us want to ask such questions as the accusations flit around Washington and almost everyone is potentially under fire. The dramatic movie scene ends with Ford saying, “It’s over. Enough.” If only D.C. hearings would end with that declaration! Sadly, it looks like we’re in for a raucous year—and the “Help the Intel Community Whistleblowers” campaign at GoFundMe was up to $217,480 on Oct. 9.

The battles in Washington were not nearly as severe as those of the 1850s, which you can read about in Joanne Freeman’s The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War (2018). Then, congressmen drew pistols and waved bowie knives at opponents. They punctuated orations by flipping their desks. The most infamous incident: South Carolina Rep. Preston Brooks used his gold-headed cane to beat Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner over the head, inflicting more than a dozen bloody blows before the cane shattered.

These days, only the words “civil war”—not sticks and stones—are becoming part of right and left threats, so far. President Donald Trump tweeted what Pastor Robert Jeffress proclaimed on Fox News: “If the Democrats are successful in removing the President from office (which they will never be), it will cause a Civil War like fracture in this Nation from which our Country will never heal.” New York’s Union Seminary, a stronghold of theological liberals, tweeted back: “Jeffress’ threats of civil war… represent disturbing abuse of spiritual authority… This preaching is fundamentally anti-Christ.”

As Elizabeth Warren became the Democratic presidential front-runner, voters faced the possibility of a campaign next year pitting our most rhetorically unusual president ever against the local level have repeatedly led to less housing for the poor.

Nonpolitical individuals and organizations also found themselves under fire. One example: Des Moines Register reporter Aaron Calvin obeyed editors’ requests that he check out the background of Carson King, a 24-year-old enjoying days of fame after he held up a sign soliciting beer money on ESPN. When the dollars became thousands, King said he’d donate the money to a children’s hospital. The thousands then become more than $1 million, helped by the Anheuser-Busch beer company. Reporter Calvin found King at age 16 had tweeted bad jokes with racial themes. When the news came out, King maturely asked forgiveness for his immaturity eight years before, but Anheuser-Busch said, “We will have no further association with him.” Next, a search for reporter Calvin’s younger messages dug up some rotten writing of his own—and the Register fired him.

Then came blog headlines like “Anheuser-Busch getting crushed for cutting ties” with King. (One online poll showed 91 percent of respondents criticizing the beer barons.)

Shoot me? Shoot him? Early in October Nonprofit Quarterly reported, “2019 will be the last year for Susan G. Komen’s annual three-day breast can-
cer walk in Philadelphia.” That’s one indication of declining support. A decade ago Komen was in the pink, bringing in $367 million in fiscal year 2011. In 2012, Komen first announced it would no longer fund Planned Parenthood, then reversed itself. Both sides were angry, and Komen’s 2013 income declined to $270 million. By 2018 it was only $82 million.

Some scientists and journalists are also firing away. After the prestigious journal Science reported a big decline in North America’s bird population, a front-page New York Times headline read, “Birds Are Vanishing From North America.” The lead was equally apocalyptic: “The skies are emptying out.”

WORLD noted the study two weeks ago under the nonhysterical header, “REDUCED.” Now we can point out that some researchers are saying Science’s shot missed. Slate quoted Todd Arnold, a University of Minnesota conservation biologist who noted how species by species “the increases outweigh the declines.” Arnold said he “could do a really cool and sophisticated analysis based on 500-plus species, [but] that would never get past the editor’s eye. It would have ended up somewhere. But certainly not in Science.”

So we have a divided nation—but some agreements are still possible. The federal government’s latest ask, a spending bill to stave off possible shutdown until Nov. 21, passed the Senate with 82 votes. Legislators regularly “reach across the aisle” to increase the national debt: Congress has already approved the federal government’s nearly $5 trillion Go-Fund-Me request. The remaining arguments concern Mexican border wall-building and taxpayer funding of abortions. We’ll learn who has the most White House clout: pro-lifers or anti-immigrationists.

For Christians, despair is never in season. As baseball’s postseason games continue, let’s pray for an attitude like that of Jonny Gomes, who played for the World Series–winning Boston Red Sox in 2013. That year, whenever teammates or fans asked him how he was doing, Gomes responded, “Just one day closer to the parade.”

BY THE NUMBERS

64%
The share of American teenagers who rarely or never talk with their friends about religion, according to the Pew Research Center.

1 in 31
The rate of twin births among U.S. women last year. The twin delivery rate has decreased from a 2014 high of 1 in 29 births, likely due to changing in vitro fertilization practices. (In 1980, the rate was 1 in 53.)

110
The number of people killed (with over 6,000 injured) in violent clashes between police and anti-government protesters in Iraq in early October.

77,242
The number of unaccompanied minors U.S. Border Patrol agents caught crossing the U.S. border in the 12 months ending in August, up 58 percent from the previous year.

2.63
The number of people living in an average American household. That’s up from 2.58 in 2010, marking the first time in at least 160 years the number of people per household has increased.
Fouled
On Oct. 4, Daryl Morey, general manager of the NBA’s Houston Rockets, tweeted an image with the popular protest slogan: “Fight for Freedom, stand with Hong Kong.” He quickly deleted the message, but the damage had been done. Chinese sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major Chinese sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major Chinese sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major Chinese sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major Chinese sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major Chinese sponsors paused their deals with the Rockets, major Chinese broadcasters dropped Rockets games, and Chinese authorities canceled two exhibition games for a team affiliated with the Rockets, according to The New York Times. The NBA is popular in China, and the Rockets have a large Chinese fan base because Chinese native Yao Ming played for the team for nearly a decade. Concerned about losing the Chinese market, Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta distanced himself from Morey, and NBA spokesman Mike Bass sent out a statement saying it was “regrettable” that Morey’s tweet “deeply offended many of our friends and fans in China.” But the Chinese-language statement the NBA posted on Weibo used much stronger language, saying it was “extremely disappointed in the inappropriate com-

Chinese censors also banned South Park, the irreverent animated show on Comedy Central, from the Chinese internet after a recent episode mocked how movies self-censored to appeal to the Chinese market. South Park creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone responded with a fake apology: “Like the NBA, we welcome the Chinese censors into our homes and into our hearts,” the statement reads. “We too love money more than freedom and democracy. Xi doesn’t look like Winnie the Pooh at all. Tune into our 300th episode this Wednesday at 10! Long live the great Communist Party of China. May the autumn’s sorghum harvest be bountiful. We good now China?”

Valued
Devolved Parliament, a satirical painting by the British artist Banksy, sold for $12.2 million at a recent auction in London. The canvas, finished in 2009, shows the House of Commons empty of members. Instead, its seats are filled with chimpanzees, some hooting, some serious, one standing, book in hand, in the middle of what looks like a speech. In a social media post, the anonymous artist appeared to make a connection between Devolved Parliament and a previous painting of his of a row of chimps, one wearing a sign that says, “Laugh now, but one day we’ll be in charge.” Its sale price was a record for Banksy and far outstripped the auction house’s estimated value for the painting.

Survived
A baby born with part of his skull missing is the first with the condition, called exencephaly, to survive. Doctors diagnosed Lucas Santa Maria, now 7 months old, with the condition while he was in the womb. They recommended his mother abort him since most babies born with exencephaly die within hours of birth. Maria Santa Maria refused, and her baby was born otherwise healthy. Dr. Tim Vogel of the North Jersey Brain and Spine Center operated on Lucas, covering his exposed brain tissue with skin. Doctors are still unsure about Lucas’ chances for normal development, but, as his skull bones grow, Vogel told CNN, there is a possibility his brain can be protected.

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When I visited Union, I could see the unique community that is fostered here. This community draws people in and was a big reason that I chose Union. I was also welcomed so well by the music faculty when I came for my music audition. I knew that this would be a place where I would be challenged academically as well as spiritually.

LEAH CAMPBELL
music education major
Knoxville, Tennessee

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‘Carrie Lam has made her choice.’
Activist from Hong Kong JOSHUA WONG, citing Jesus’ teaching that no man can serve two masters, in a tweet on the decision by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, a professed Catholic, to enact an emergency measure to ban masks in Hong Kong due to the protests. Wong said Lam’s loyalty is to Beijing.

‘It’s like waking up in a nightmare.’
LORI BEATRICE, of Phoenixville, Pa., on an invasion of the spotted lanternfly in Pennsylvania. The 1-inch-long bugs fly in people’s faces, land on them, and dump their sticky waste everywhere. The lanternfly is currently threatening Pennsylvania’s $4.8 billion wine industry.

‘Incompatible with human dignity.’
The United Kingdom’s EMPLOYMENT TRIBUNAL on a doctor’s Biblical beliefs on human sexuality. The Department for Work and Pensions forced Dr. David Mackereth out of his job after he refused to use transgender pronouns. The tribunal ruled that Dr. Mackereth’s beliefs are not “worthy of respect in a democratic society.”

‘I don’t know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug, please?’
BRANDT JEAN, younger brother of murder victim Botham Jean, to the judge in the trial of former Dallas Police Officer Amber Guyger, who had been convicted of murdering Botham Jean. During his victim impact statement, Jean forgave Guyger and said, “I want the best for you, because that’s exactly what Botham would want you to do, and the best would be to give your life to Christ.” The judge allowed the hug.

‘I feel like the last violinist on the Titanic.’
Venezuelan chef JONATHAN MORALES on wanting to leave the country. More than 4 million Venezuelans have left the socialist country as its economy sinks.
Time for action?
How seriously does the United Kingdom’s Royal Mail take its mail delivery? The British postal service has fired a letter carrier who delivered an item one minute late. Robert Lockyer, a Royal Mail veteran of nearly three decades, was accused of gross misconduct and fired for the short delay in 2018. At the time of the dismissal, Lockyer had been on warning for a previous violation. Lockyer and union officials appealed his firing to an employment tribunal, which confirmed his firing in August. Lockyer said he’ll try his case in the British legal system.

Release and catch
U.S. Marshals reported on Sept. 25 that a 29-year-old convict being held at Bee County Jail in Texas had escaped, warning that the suspect was armed and dangerous. Later that day, officials with the jail reported that Ernest Ramirez hadn’t escaped. Rather, Ramirez had been released by accident. The accidental release in Bee County, south of San Antonio, came just days after an admission by Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar that his office had accidentally released a dozen inmates over the past year. In most cases, authorities recovered the mistakenly released inmates within a few days. Authorities announced on Oct. 1 that U.S. Border Patrol agents had recaptured Ramirez.

Water fight
The Russian navy has reported that one of its vessels came under attack and was sunk during a September research mission in the Arctic Ocean. The vessel was a rubber landing craft. The attacker: an angry walrus. An official release from Russia’s Northern Fleet speculated that the female walrus was probably defending her nearby young. The walrus managed to sink the boat, but not before the Russian sailors were able to scramble to shore. The incident happened off the coast of Franz Josef Land.

Details, details …
Officials with an Oregon water authority left out one crucial detail when pitching a new water treatment plant to the Portland City Council in 2017. The water bureau forgot to include the cost of the pipes. Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler lit into Water Bureau director Mike Stuhr when the water official disclosed the oversight during a Sept. 17 meeting. Stuhr had come to the City Council meeting to ask for $350 million more to complete the water treatment plant after it had already approved $500 million in 2017. The oversight infuriated Wheeler and the City Council, which pressed Stuhr on why he didn’t disclose two years ago that the $500 million budget for the water plant didn’t include something as central as pipes.
Send and repeat

Stephanie Lay of Windham, Maine, probably has a letter she received from United Healthcare memorized. That’s because by Sept. 19 she had received the letter 46 times, each one identical to the others. She reached out to the company on that day to stop sending the letters, but the letters didn’t stop until Sept. 23. By then, Lay said, her mailbox had been filled with more than 500 letters from United, all addressed to her autistic son, who lives in a separate care facility. A spokesman for United said the mass mailing was the result of a coding issue in its computer system that employees are in the process of fixing.

A Hemi under the hood

An Indiana driver expressed amazement after police were able to keep up with him during a 140 mph car chase. A trooper spotted the driver of a 2002 Acura traveling at 116 mph in a 55 mph zone in the early morning hours of Sept. 19. As the state trooper attempted to make a stop, the 20-year-old driver sped away, eventually reaching speeds of 140 mph. Driver Dino Gagliano said later he thought the Indiana State Police cruiser only had a V6 engine. In actuality, the cruisers are outfitted with V8 Hemis. Police arrested Gagliano and charged him with felony resisting and a misdemeanor charge of reckless driving.

Designer dogs

The creator of the Labradoodle breed of dogs has apologized for what he now calls a “Frankenstein’s monster.” Guide dog trainer and breeder Wally Conron, now 90, told ABC Australia he regrets creating the Labrador-poodle cross in 1989. “[They’re] either crazy or have a hereditary problem,” he said. The Australian breeder says current breeders have gone too far with hybrid dog breeds without thinking about the potential impact on dog health or disposition.

Aging ankles

Italian researchers have warned that Michelangelo’s Renaissance masterpiece sculpture of David is at risk of crumbling because of weak ankles. Fractures were first discovered in David’s ankles in the 19th century, some 350 years after its completion in 1504. In September, researchers at the University of Florence working in cooperation with the Italian government released details of an experiment on small plaster replicas of the marble work. According to scientists, the statue is stable for now, but could crumble if a major earthquake strikes Florence. Museum officials say they have been monitoring the size of David’s fractures since 2001.

Make-work for volunteers

Celebrating International Coastal Cleanup Day by holding an event to pick up litter on a local beach sounds like a good idea. But what if your local beach is pristine and litterless? The mayor of a South Korean town purchased hundreds of pounds of trash to spread across his clean beaches ahead of the Sept. 21 cleanup day. The point, he said later in a statement, was to give the roughly 600 volunteers who signed up something to do. Mayor Lee Dong-jin said the imposter garbage was completely removed from the beach near Jindo, South Korea, and promised locals that none of the trucked-in trash made it into the ocean.
The saddest word
WHEN SAYING GOODBYE BRINGS TEARS

I don’t envy others their big houses or frequent vacations (or not much!). Here’s what I do envy: Those grandparents who get to visit their grandkids more than twice a year. Living less than a day’s drive—say, three hours—away from grown children seems ideal. It’s close enough to join them for school plays and tournament games and sleepovers, but not near enough to be an imposition (or a convenience?). I’ll have to say, though, if my offspring wanted to move down the road I wouldn’t object. Instead, they both live on opposite sides of the country. Better than opposite sides of the globe, but getting together is like the logistics for a summit meeting with all the scheduling arrangements, lodging, and flight plans.

Even so, my life as a grandma is nothing to complain about, except when it’s time to say goodbye.

Goodbye is supposed to be one of the saddest words in the English language. Not necessarily so, at the end of an enjoyable evening with friends or an interminable phone conversation with the IRS (once you finally get an agent on the line). But when clinging to little ones who will grow 2 inches before you see them again... that’s sad. Or when you know your mother will never again wake up in this world. Or when you didn’t get to say it, but it occupies the space where your dad used to be.

The Bible records some sorrowful goodbyes. David and Jonathan wept when they parted in the field, not knowing if they would lay eyes on each other again. Paul took a tearful farewell of the Ephesian elders after assuring them it was final. One of the longest goodbyes ever recorded is John 14-17: Jesus’ farewell to His disciples. He didn’t say the word, but “I go” hangs over almost every section: “I am going,” “I go to prepare a place,” “I am leaving,” “a little while and you will see me no more.”

Like many of His other hard sayings, this one went over their heads. Even if they had understood what He meant, it would have seemed so wrong. “Don’t You love us, Jesus? Why won’t You stay with us?” In the same way it seems not just sad, but wrong, to part from a grandchild who just planted a wet kiss on your cheek. We were made for relationship, but every hello will end with a goodbye. Is this the way it’s supposed to be?

“It is to your advantage that I go away,” Jesus said, “for if I do not, the Helper will not come to you.” We know He was speaking of the Holy Spirit, but like His closest disciples, we don’t at first understand the reasoning. What about this: The work of Christ means nothing to us until the Spirit breathes it into our hearts. The love of the Father can’t penetrate until the Spirit opens up the eternal Trinitarian bond and pulls us inside. That’s why Jesus can say, “Abide in me,” even while speaking of going away. He does not dismiss the pain of goodbye, but He redeems it. “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy.”

That applies not just to the bittersweet farewells after a long and well-lived life, but also to the fraught ones, where love was not pure or regret pierces our sorrow. A 54-year-old friend dying of cancer knows she will meet her Lord but still longs to see her grandchildren grow up. Why so soon? A father lamenting his son’s suicide tortures himself over what he could have said—why so hasty? A daughter caring for her Alzheimer’s-afflicted mother feels guilty for wondering, Why so long? A wife who could have loved better sees her dying husband’s face turned away: Why no forgiveness?

“Let not your hearts be troubled.” Fraught farewells are never the end, much less the temporary ones at the airport departure lane. Christ kicked out the back wall of goodbye and cleared a path to a better hello. Let’s follow Him. ©
“The impact of the clinic is visible in the city of Moundou. The evangelical testimony of the clinic is growing. God knows our desire to serve Him and he has given us brothers and sisters in the Luke Society to fulfill our vision for Him in Chad, a country truly hungry for salvation.”

— DR. FREDERIC DJONGALI
MOUNDOU, CHAD

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In the run-up to Joker’s Hollywood premiere, director Todd Phillips gave several interviews practically guaranteed to set media tempers flaring. “Outrage has become a commodity,” he told one trade publication. He then lambasted “woke culture” to Vanity Fair, claiming it’s killing the comedy genre.

Since then, the R-rated Joker, which received top prizes and long ovations at the Venice Film Festival, has started to see its Rotten Tomatoes score drop—something that probably says more about the political preoccupations of the reviewer class than sudden shifts in opinion about the movie.

So while not wanting to defend a violent, profanity-heavy film I can’t recommend to WORLD’s audience, I nonetheless have to push back against the collective sneer that’s dismissing the central themes of Joker as so much angry, white maleness. Part of the reason it works as a visceral gut punch is because it acknowledges some of what’s driving the epidemic of rage among America’s isolated young men.

Typically, movie villains seek to destroy and kill because they just want to watch the world burn. Yet even Satan is motivated by more than this—namely, pride and envy make him want to devour the chief of his rival’s creations. And pitiable, pathetic Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix) is being devoured.

In the past, especially in the Heath Ledger incarnation, it was accurate to call the Joker nihilistic. But the reviews that do so with this film are simply wrong. To nurse grievances, one must believe in some form of justice. Arthur believes fervently, and not without some reason, that he’s getting the short end of life’s stick. He’s the butt of every
joke, the punching bag of street toughs, the rejected, fatherless orphan.

Added to this seething resentment, his violent tendencies are nurtured by a pornographic environment. Phillips is surprisingly restrained with his R rating here. We see billboards advertising strip clubs as well as vague glimpses of skin in the journal Arthur maniacally scribbles in. Enough to make it clear that his lust is compounding his loneliness. It’s impossible not to feel empathy for this excruciatingly sad clown.

Most of the controversy surrounding the film centers on the idea that a character who shares so many characteristics with recent mass shooters could elicit our compassion. But shouldn’t he? Shouldn’t they? Christians make great efforts to show love to murderers once they’re behind bars, but what about the strange, repellent loners before they become Jokers?

As Scottish Pastor Robert Murray M’Cheyne wrote, “the seeds of every sin known to man is in each of our hearts. Phillips’ treatment of this iconic villain, intended or not, shows that watering those seeds seems right to a man. As we’re watching the film, it, at times, feels right to our compassion. But shouldn’t he? Christians make great efforts to show love to murderers once they’re behind bars, but what about the strange, repellent loners before they become Jokers?

After Arthur murders a trio of wealthy, entitled alpha males, he begins to amass followers who cheer Arthur because of their own grievances, some of which have merit. Show me the human being who isn’t sinned against. The evil of Joker and his followers reaches full flower when they burn down all the institutions because of the dereliction of duty of some.

Of course, a remaining question, Are comic book movies—though unquestionably the collective myths of our time—the best place to explore such complex ideas? Phillips has a decent answer for that. Hollywood doesn’t make big-budget movies that aren’t about comic book characters anymore. “Look at [it] as a way to sneak a real movie in the studio system under the guise of a comic book film,” he said in one of those interviews.

Ultimately though, Joker fails because of its genre. The character has to hit those DC marks. He has to become the mastermind supervillain directing hordes of minions. He has to rise to the top so he can take on the man in black. It’s a preposterous finale that turns all that came before into a twisted fantasy. Real Arthur Flecks don’t end that way. And in a different kind of movie, a better movie, neither would this one.

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**Television**

**Perfect Harmony**

In movies and TV, one story premise seems used more often than most others: A new director takes over a music program, a football program, a literature department, etc. The latest example is NBC’s Perfect Harmony, a Thursday night comedy about a struggling church choir.

Not all such dramas feel stale (think Mr. Holland’s Opus). And of course, the newcomer, teacher, director, or coach typically has new ideas that don’t jibe with the community. The problem comes when producers rely on lazy stereotypes to populate the small towns their choirs, schools, and churches inevitably inhabit.

This show has them all. Rednecks who married too early. A sugary-sweet pastor who turns out to be a villainous hypocrite. To be fair, though: All churches should strive for the diversity of Perfect Harmony’s fictional choir community.

Bradley Whitford (The West Wing) playing grumpy widower Arthur Cochran might be enough to draw viewers, but this show lacks Alan Sorkin’s screenwriting chops. “I became head of one of the best music departments in the country without caring about being accepted,” Arthur declares at the start of Episode 2, summarizing the pilot for any viewers who missed it. “Why start now?”

Some quicker-witted dialogue peppers the show, and certain characters show more nuance after Episode 1. And yes, there’s plenty of music, like a mash-up of “Hallelujah Chorus” and “Eye of the Tiger.” Still, viewers may not get a chance to see if things improve: Ratings for the first two episodes were dismal.

Last year NBC tried a series with a similar premise, Rise, loosely based on a young adult book series. The show was extremely sexualized and highlighted the “small-minded,” small-town folk making life hard for a theater director. It didn’t get picked up for a second season.

Which raises the question: When will Hollywood get the message that relying on rural America for clichéd characters isn’t as profitable as it thinks?

—by LAURA FINCH

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**BOX OFFICE TOP 10**

*FOR THE WEEKEND OF OCT. 4-6 according to Box Office Mojo*

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<th>Movie</th>
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<td>Joker* R</td>
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<td>Abominable PG</td>
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<td>Hustlers R</td>
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<td>It: Chapter Two R</td>
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<td>Judy—PG-13</td>
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<td>Ad Astra* PG-13</td>
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<td>Rambo: Last Blood R</td>
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<td>War unrated</td>
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<td>Good Boys R</td>
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*Reviewed by WORLD*
Sheep Among Wolves Vol. II

The new documentary Sheep Among Wolves Vol. II describes mass conversions of Muslims to Christ inside Iran. The film relates this good news amid some production foibles and controversial missiology, yet rightly challenges viewers to self-examination and prayer for the persecuted church.

Successful evangelization among Muslims “flips the script,” the filmmakers say, on Western methods. Instead of winning converts then discipling them, Christians teach nonbelievers how to worship, pray, and read the Bible. Muslims learn they owe submission to Jesus, not Allah. Conversions follow, often reported in connection with visions of Christ. The disciple-making movement (DMM) has thrived in cultures where a strong sense of obedience to the divine already exists. (For more on DMM, read Jerry Trousdale’s Miraculous Movements. Radius International has published a thoughtful critique.)

“Mosques are empty” in Iran, the film proclaims, as Islam’s second-class citizens—women (and blacks in East Africa, I’ve seen firsthand)—are fleeing Islam. Hardship that turns “millions” to Jesus is better than democracy; “spiritual sleepiness” in the West is worse than persecution. The film touts both the decentralized nature of the underground Iranian church and the fact that the “majority” of its leaders are women.

A few minor peeves: subtitle typos, excessive audience information from meetings they’ve held with Iranian church leaders in Indonesia, where much of the film is shot. But a number of Iranians with face and voice disguised do give powerful accounts of coming to Christ. (The unrated film discusses rape and suicide.)

The film (streaming on YouTube) also explores Iran’s relationship with Israel. Iranian Christians are “falling in love” with the Jewish people as well as the Messiah. But there comes an apocalyptic plot twist: God is “raising up a resistance church in the Middle East” that will prevent another attempted extermination of the Jews and provoke them to repentance.

Perhaps. God ways aren’t Western ways.

—by BOB BROWN

Emergence

In ABC’s new weekly drama Emergence, shadowy villains want to get their hands on a little girl who seems to have survived a mysterious plane crash. As a police chief and her family shield the youngster from danger, they try to find out why she is so valuable to evil forces. ABC might have a hit on its hands with Emergence, but is it worthwhile viewing for Christians?

In the middle of the night, a plane crashes over Long Island Sound, and strange storms cause the electrical grid to malfunction. Chief Jo Evans (Allison Tolman) arrives at the scene of the wreckage to find a furtive survivor, a little girl named Piper (Alexa Swinton) who instantly bonds with the officer. Who is she, and how has she alone remained alive when the entire aircraft has been destroyed?

Piper has lost her memory and has no place to go. Chief Evans’ home becomes a place of safety, and Evans’ father and daughter accept Piper as one of their own. Even Evans’ ex-husband, despite misgivings, wants to keep Piper safe and camps out with the clan while they figure things out.

Evil forces want Piper, and they want to destroy any evidence of the plane crash. They bury the wreckage far out at sea and seek out anything associated with the accident. Young Piper seems to know more than she is letting on. Her memories resurface, despite her attempts to keep them at bay. She wants desperately to belong to a family, to stay in a safe haven far from a chaotic past she has escaped.

After only three episodes have aired, it’s difficult to make a recommendation about this series. The plot involves an intriguing mystery, but young viewers would find the scenes of gore disturbing, and the show contains occasionally salty language. Still, the characters are well developed and believable (so far), and the themes of love, loyalty, good vs. evil, and a family battling tyranny are timeless.

—by MARTY VANDRIEL
In *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Pantheon, 2019), Martin Hägglund understandably writes, “The thought of my own death, and the death of everything I love, is utterly painful. I do not want to die, since I want to sustain my life and the life of what I love.” But he then writes, “At the same time, I do not want my life to be eternal. An eternal life is not only unattainable but also undesirable, since it would eliminate the care and passion that animate my life.”

Say what? In “Amazing Grace” we sing, “When we’ve been there thousand years, / Bright shining as the sun, / We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise / Than when we’d first begun.” That joyful excitement moves me, but Hägglund writes, “If I believed that my life would last forever … I would never be seized by the need to do anything with my time.” That doesn’t make sense to me: I don’t need an imminent deadline to write a column. Some do, but why make that weakness a universal principle?

And why do we care about time? Vishal Mangalwadi’s *This Book Changed Everything* (SoughtAfterMedia, 2019) describes the Bible’s multiple impact on us—including our understanding of time. He describes boarding a German train scheduled to get him to a small village at 5:59 p.m.—and he arrived at 5:59! Mangalwadi compares that with the experience of a friend in his native India who arrived at a railway station 25 minutes before the train’s scheduled departure, only to see the train move away before he could board. The friend marched furiously to the station manager and complained, but the manager said, “Oh! That was yesterday’s train.”

Mangalwadi asks why the cultures are so different. He says European Bible-readers learned that man “began in time … but God breathed eternity into his soul. … Resurrection and eternal life make us greater than time. Human beings can and ought to manage or steward time.” He also notes, “Hindu philosophers were brilliant. They could have made mathematics the language of science but did not because their energies were spent seeking ways to be delivered from the illusion (Maya) of the physical world.”

Andreas Wagner begins *Life Finds a Way: What Evolution Teaches Us About Creativity* (Basic, 2019) by relishing eons of time: “Long before life itself arose, nature … created glittering crystals, like the diamonds that take millions of years to gestate in the womb of our planet.” Once these building blocks had assembled into the earliest living cells, Darwinian evolution kicked in.” Note the usage: “had assembled.” Who assembled them? Then, “kicked in”: a mechanical metaphor in a book about creativity.

Lewis Dartnell begins *Origins: How Earth’s History Shaped Human History* (Basic, 2019) with four words: “We are all apes.” The book goes downhill from there.
THE SECRETS WE KEPT Lara Prescott
Prescott’s highly publicized debut novel focuses on the CIA’s 1950s use of Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, which Soviet leaders tried to suppress. The agency uses two former typists, now spies, to get its hands on the book, since women could go where men couldn’t. Meanwhile in Russia, Pasternak labors away, sacrificing to get his novel published, and his mistress sacrifices even more: She goes to the Gulag to protect his secrets. The story, improbable but based on historical fact, weaves back and forth between Russia and the United States and includes a nongraphic lesbian relationship between the two typists.

SOLD ON A MONDAY Kristina McMorris
Ellis Reed, a Depression-era reporter, sees two young children on a porch with a sign reading “2 children for sale.” He snaps a photo. But later, when the photo and negative become damaged, he stages another photo with different kids. That ethical shortcut leads to a series of tragic events, which Reed tries to undo. Spurring him on—and working with him—is Lily, the publisher’s secretary and an aspiring columnist. In this historical novel, McMorris portrays desperate parents and those willing to take advantage of their desperation. Lily’s backstory, which includes an unwed pregnancy, shows respect for unborn life.

THE POPPY WIFE Caroline Scott
Set in 1921, this novel follows Edie and her brother-in-law, Harry, as they pick up the pieces after the Great War. Harry lost two brothers in the fighting—one died and one is missing. Edie’s husband, Francis, is the missing one, and she believes he might be alive. Harry searches as he takes photos of gravesites for families back in Britain. Edie looks for the setting of her last photo of Francis. Though slow in parts, Scott’s novel, which releases Nov. 5, makes vivid the physical devastation caused by the war and the shattered lives left behind.

ONE DAY Gene Weingarten
Here’s the idea behind the book: “Select an ordinary day at random, report it deeply, then tell it like it happened—from midnight to midnight.” The day turns out to be Dec. 28, 1986. Journalist Weingarten does a deep dive into events of the day: The research and writing took six years and more than 500 interviews. The result is a series of compelling stories that show human beings at their best and worst. It includes a groundbreaking surgery, fire, murder, and ordinary moments in sad and tragic lives.

AFTERWORD
Debra Moerke’s *Murder, Motherhood, and Miraculous Grace* (Tyndale Momentum, 2019) tells how the Moerkes fostered a newborn who had cocaine in her system at birth. Before long the family was caring for the baby’s four siblings from two different fathers. When the authorities unexpectedly returned the children to their mother, one child died, though it took 10 months for the truth to come out. This book tells an awful story of parental cruelty, forgiveness, and God’s grace displayed through the Moerkes.

In *If You Lived Here You’d Be Home by Now* (Harper, 2019), Washington Post data journalist Christopher Ingraham tells how he uprooted his family—his government employee wife and 2-year-old twins—from Baltimore to Red Lake County, Minn., a place he had written about as “the worst place to live in America.” At times funny in a fish-out-of-water way, the book is also about the humbling of an East Coast elitist who comes to appreciate elements of small-town life. —S.O.
Making connections

MIDDLE GRADE BOOKS THAT EXPLORE UNDERSTANDING, COMMUNITY, AND FRIENDSHIP
reviewed by Rachel Lynn Aldrich

SOME PLACES MORE THAN OTHERS Renée Watson
Amara grew up in Portland, Ore., far away from the extended family she wished she could meet. She is excited when she gets the chance to go with her father to visit New York City, where he grew up and his parents and siblings still live. While there, Amara learns about the history of her family and African Americans in the United States and discovers how our family history and culture affect us in ways we don’t always recognize. The story explores forgiveness and understanding between generations, the importance of family, and the cultural differences between the East and West Coasts. (Ages 9-13)

SONG FOR A WHALE Lynne Kelly
This whimsical and bittersweet book is about loneliness and the importance of connection. Iris’ deafness causes her to feel isolated from her schoolmates and even some of her family members who don’t know how to sign. When she learns about a hybrid whale named Blue 55 whose song is too high for the other whales to hear, she is determined to make a song for him and tell him he is not alone. During her pursuit of the whale, Iris discovers that a healthy life thrives on relationships—with family members, friends, and, sometimes, even with whales. (Ages 9-13)

THE UNSUNG HERO OF BIRDSONG, USA Brenda Woods
A near miss on his bicycle changes 12-year-old Gabriel’s whole summer. A stranger named Meriwether Hunter saves him from an oncoming car, and the two become unlikely but close friends. The story explores the little-understood experience of African American soldiers returning from the battlefields of World War II to hometowns that did not always appreciate their service. It tackles themes of friendship and empathy between people with significant cultural, racial, or religious differences. The author also weaves into the story interesting details about the time period, like the Green Book that African Americans used to travel safely. (Ages 9-13)

THE MULTIPLYING MYSTERIES OF MOUNT TEN Krista Van Dolzer
This fun mystery focuses on math and codes. When a storm prevents Esther from getting to art camp and instead strands her at math camp, she must team up with the other students to solve a mystery. As she makes friends with the “math nerds” and learns to organize and solve logic puzzles, she discovers her artistic creativity isn’t so different from the talents of the Camp Archimedes students. Although the book seems to take a dark turn, the conclusion is lighthearted and appropriate for middle graders. A great read for kids who are interested in puzzles and codes. (Ages 8-12)

AFTERWORD
In The Perfect Horse (Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2019) Elizabeth Letts tells the true story of how American soldiers undertook a daring mission during World War II to rescue hundreds of purebred horses, including Austria’s famed Lipizzaners, from certain death at the hands of a starving Russian army. The story goes deeper, though, to also chronicle the Nazis’ pursuit of the perfect warhorse, which paralleled their quest for a master human race.

Although classified as a young readers edition, the book is heavy on historical details, making it better suited for teens. Letts’ afterword about eugenics also necessitates a caution: She heralds Darwinian theory as “a cornerstone of the life sciences, its accuracy demonstrated over and over again,” while overlooking how Darwinists’ devaluation of human life led to a warped worldview that eventually paved the way to genocide of the Jewish people.

—Kristin Chapman
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Back in the 1990s, photographer Chris Arnade worked as an analyst on Wall Street, and he would go on long walks to relieve his stress. The walks got longer and longer, to the point that he quit work and began documenting the stories of the people he met on his walks in New York’s downtrodden neighborhoods.

He spent several years photographing and interviewing residents of the Bronx neighborhood of Hunts Point and then traveled elsewhere around the country, turning his findings into a book, *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*. His Jacob Riis–style exposure of what he calls the “back row” of America gives a record of those left out of the American dream: the drug addicted, the homeless, the discouraged.

Arnade and I spoke at his home in upstate New York, where he tends a menagerie of animal outcasts: a dog named Zumi, a cat from a crack house, snapping turtles in the pond who love chicken nuggets, and about 30 groundhogs who were attempting a takeover of the area under his porch.

**What’s your quick definition for “front row” and “back row”?** It’s, “Did you go to an elite college or not?” I used to do the McDonald’s test: Is it an icky place with unhealthy food? Or is it a place where it’s wonderful and you like to hang out?

**You’ve spent a lot of time at McDonald’s interviewing the “back row.” What’s your favorite item on the menu?** I always go for the dollar menus because I’m cheap. I get my latte every morning. Usually I go for the two-for-$5 special if they have it, and I’ll get two Big Macs. The key to McDonald’s is to get rid of the cheese. There’s something about fast-food cheese.

**How did your experience as a Wall Street trader lead to this attention to the back row?** I was shocked how provincial New York City is. I worked at Salomon Brothers, a high-end firm. There were people in my office who were worth X-million, who had spent all their life in New York City and never been to Brooklyn. Even though my office was still dominated by lacrosse players from Harvard, there was a former elevator repair guy who was really good with numbers. The dad of one of my bosses was a firefighter. By the end of my time in Wall Street, people had the same resume—a kid who was the valedictorian, went to Harvard or Princeton, and then did nonprofit work for the summers. They’re good employees, but it felt like paint-by-numbers.

**Did that change in what jobs were available to those in the back row lead to some of the societal despair you documented?** It’s a system that makes nobody feel valued, because the system says, We’re ranking people based on how intelligent you are, which we translate into how much money you have. On Wall Street, nobody was ever happy with their pay because they always knew that someone made a little bit more, and they had gotten into this rat race of three homes. You can say, That’s your own fault. But it’s what society expects of people. And the people on the bottom, it’s implied that they lost. We pretend that it’s a meritocracy, so it’s your fault if you don’t succeed. So it makes the people at the bottom not only frustrated but humiliated. I don’t want to be on record for saying I understand why people would kill themselves. But I understand why people would kill themselves in that system.

**So you think the growing divide between front row and back row has something to do with the growing number of “deaths of despair” from suicide and overdose?** It’s clear that something is very, very wrong. Life spans are going down. Suicide is a stunning act. Animals don’t commit suicide. Addiction, to me, is a form of suicide. It’s not about lacking iPhones or lack of cars. There’s a spiritual lacking there. And I say this as someone who is a self-described atheist.

**How do we change?** I don’t think it’s fixable by any policy, because we overvalue rationality and material things. We’ve made meaning all about how much you have. I feel like one of the solutions is faith. One of the wonderful things about faith is you don’t have to have much to have it. It’s free.

**Are you calling for revival in the United States?** I suppose. Again, I’m
not religious, but the secular shift has not worked. And I don’t just see religion as having a utility. I learned through this project that maybe religion is just as right as sciences. Maybe my privilege and the privilege of a lot of people like me is obscuring the evidence for religion. We’ve removed ourselves so much from the messiness of life that we don’t see the evidence for faith as being true. I’m on unsolid ground here because I’m speaking about theology, but for me religion is about being humble. One of the things that comes with privilege is hubris. So in some sense, you’re removed from the humility that allows you to understand other things greater than we can understand.

_Were you ever tempted by the spiritual things you were exposed to in the course of reporting?_ I don’t think I have the humbleness, to be honest. But it’s very appealing to me.

‘On Wall Street, nobody was ever happy with their pay because they always knew that someone made a little bit more. And the people on the bottom, it’s implied that they lost.’
The differences resulting from the “in the world” emphases of the “Social Gospel” and the “but not of the world” emphases of the other kind (the “Private Gospel”? the “Great-Commission Gospel”?) have long exacerbated frictions between liberal-leaning and conservative-leaning Christians.

But one faith-based sector that has proved particularly immune to the repercussions of that rift is black-gospel music. The Time for Peace Is Now: Gospel Music About Us—a new compilation on the Luaka Bop label showcasing obscure ‘70s singles by various and equally obscure artists—demonstrates something of both the how and the why.

The “how” has to do with lyrics that directly address social dysfunction from an unapologetically Biblical point of view.

Both the Little Shadows—sung “Time for Peace” and the Soul Stirrers—sung “I’m Trying to Be Your Friend” quote directly from the Beatitudes. The Staple Jr. Singers’ “We Got a Race to Run” refers to the story of Lazarus and Dives. Willie Scott & the Birmingham Spirituals’ “Keep Your Faith to the Sky” holds up as an exemplar the woman with the issue of blood from Mark 5 (and Luke 8). And James Bynum’s “We Are in Need” weaves 1 Corinthians 13:11 into a deeply soulful plea for men to step up and be strong.

One might almost conclude from such Scripturally based exhortations to brotherhood and to keeping hope alive that in Christ there is no left or right.

The music reflects a similar indifference to categories. “Time for Peace” proceeds along a descending, bongos-accompanied bass figure atop which, ironically enough, Mick Jagger could’ve chanted “Sympathy for the Devil.” And if “Peace in the Land” suggests that the Gospel I.Q.’s dug Clarence Carter (it does), the melody of “Don’t Give Up” suggests that the William Singers harbored a fondness for “House of the Rising Sun.”

As for the “why” of the project, Luaka Bop’s president Yale Evelev says that it has mainly to do with the music’s sometimes complicated evolution easy to follow) and its willingness to defy egalitarianism and grant more space to more-deserving artists.

The proportions sometimes feel off—three Emmylou Harris songs to one from Buck Owens, one Johnny Rodriguez song to zero from Billy Joe Shaver. And “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” fore, middle, and aft risks overstating the obvious.

But there’s also subtlety galore. And what the soundtrack hasn’t squeezed in it points to.
Notable new albums
reviewed by Arsenio Orteza

TURN OFF THE NEWS, BUILD A GARDEN
Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real

This album starts out shuffling the country-rock deck with so much aplomb, skill, and imagination that its utter collapse somewhere around the three-quarter mark comes more as a shock than a disappointment, though it’s that too. Neither the shock nor the disappointment, incidentally, has anything to do with how seldom Lukas sounds anything like his famous father Willie (two songs tops). It has to do with how precisely the last five songs sound like the work of five different and not particularly skillful or imaginative bands.

RIDE ME BACK HOME  Willie Nelson

On his last several releases, Nelson has included at least one song about death or its approach, and this album—his best of the 2010s, its cover of Billy Joel’s “Just the Way You Are” notwithstanding—has two, “One More Song to Write” and “Come On Time” (which should be punctuated “Come On, Time”). The former may be a standard someday. It's the latter, however, that feels alive right now. Who else but an ornery old cuss would dare Time to hurry up and get things over with?

BEYOND THE DOOR  Redd Kross

Nearly 40 years after their debut, Jeff and Steve McDonald have hit upon the perfect Redd Kross theme song: “The Party Underground.” The underground, after all, is where they remain despite their best efforts to break out, and a party is what they sound like, especially with drummers like their current one, Dale Crover (think Keith Moon meets Glen Sobel), to galvanize their demolition-derby guitars and power-pop hooks. Undeniable and irresistible proof that they know they’re not getting any younger: “When Do I Get to Sing ‘My Way’?”

OH BY THE WAY ... IT’S NATALIE SWEET
Natalie Sweet

Natalie Sweet has done Ramones fans a big favor. As a singer she’s no Joey, and as a guitarist Morten Henriksen’s no Johnny, but the lyrics are right up at least one of Joey’s and Dee Dee’s alleys (the one not leading to the psycho ward), and the sped-up-bubblegum-as-battering-ram attack that facilitates the squeezing of 13 songs into 31 minutes definitely has the spirit. It’s just too bad that, for reasons entirely beyond Sweet’s control, Tommy Erdelyi couldn’t have done the final mix.

ENCORE

For a Grammy-winning producer and a singer-songwriter-musician whose solo career turns 35 this year, Charlie Peacock seems surprisingly blasé about publicity. If not for Facebook, you might never know that so far this year he has released two excellent, MP3-only EPs (well, sort of), the 23-minute Souled-Out Fellowship of Friends & Funk and the 31-minute Lil’ Willie. They’re as different from each other as both are from his 40-minute 2018 jazz outing When Light Flashes Help Is on the Way.

On Souled-Out, Peacock alternates between sleek R&B balladry and crisp Minneapolis funk, soliciting vocals from such “friends” as his son Sam Ashworth, his daughter-in-law Ruby Amanfu, Jason Eskridge, and Jonathan Winstead. On Lil’ Willie, Peacock marries gentle, Americana-based pop to terse, relationship-based lyrics. “You’re like a movie done right—you never go on too long” is a perfect simile for the era of overstuffed Hollywood blockbusters.

—A.O.
A new low

U.S. REFUGEE TURNABOUT IS CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

The Trump administration has announced a new ceiling for refugees admitted to the United States, starting with the new fiscal year Oct. 1. For 2020 the maximum number allowed will be 18,000 refugees, slashing a ceiling that for 40 years has averaged 95,000.

Historically the United States does not meet its own admissions ceiling, and it’s hard to see the Trump administration reaching even this new low. In 2018 with a ceiling of 45,000 refugees, admissions stood at 22,500, and admissions in 2019 will number about the same.

The new ceiling can only mean further cuts to a program where radical decreases already have proved harsh. The number of Iranian Christians resettled in the United States has fallen from 2,086 in 2016 to 66 in 2019. Religious minorities whose persecution qualifies them as refugees see their chance of winning U.S. protection fall anywhere from 60 percent to 95 percent. For Yazidis from Syria it’s been 100 percent—from 26 admitted in 2017 to 0 in each of the last two years.

To justify so radical a departure, the Trump administration says it will pursue “a new, practical focus on assisting refugees where they are concentrated” and will work harder using foreign assistance and other tools “to resolve the crisis points that drive displacement in the first place.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told me in July, “Our mission set has been to drive better outcomes for them where they are.”

Yet it’s hard to see where the Trump administration is fully engaged diplomatically and militarily to carry out that new strategy. Troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Syria are likely to spike—rather than ease—an exodus of civilians.

U.S. diplomats rarely visit hot spots where refugees flee. And a business-as-usual bureaucracy in Washington isn’t primed for the Pompeo mission set. Our reporting in Iraq has shown how U.S. aid to restore communities devastated by ISIS has stalled now for two years (see “Help is [still, maybe] on the way,” Sept. 28), lowering refugee returns.

Most refugees would welcome opportunities to remain in or near their homeland in safety, where language and food are familiar and friends aren’t far away. By definition they cannot go back without facing grave danger. That’s no justification for dismantling refugee admissions.

Inevitably someone will respond, “We can’t take everyone.” That’s also a nonargument. At 95,000 the United States accepted at most .37 percent of the world’s 26 million refugees, a drop in the bucket. At 18,000 it will accept .07 percent, a swipe at a problem so faint as to be cruel. It ensures the United States no serious place at any table where the problems of mass migration are debated.

The trend set by the Trump administration already has compounded hardships. Numbers have fallen so low it’s forced key U.S. groups working with refugees—like World Relief and Catholic Relief Services—to dismantle offices and let go expert workers.

Families at refugee camps around the world have been stopped in process. Bethany Christian Service’s Nate Bult reported families who “slept outside the office that was going to bring them to the airport the next day and when workers arrived, they had to tell them that their flights were canceled.”

World Relief’s Matthew Soerens argues also that “by further restricting refugee resettlement, the administration is exacerbating the humanitarian nightmare along our border.”

Acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Ken Cuccinelli confirmed that the United States would turn away persecuted Christians who, denied entry as refugees, try to seek asylum at the border: “We’ll turn them back,” he said.

That’s actually a violation of U.S. laws and treaties on asylum. But it underscores how Trump policy is a break from precedent, from law, and from an American system once infused with compassion rooted in Christian and Jewish teaching.

The Trump administration advertises its commitment to religious freedom, hosting State Department ministerials and chastising foreign leaders who oppress religious minorities. But when it shuts the door to those most endangered for their faith, America looks to the rest of the world like the religious freedom it touts is for Western believers who live in safety.
As violent demonstrations roil Hong Kong, a bold group of volunteers is providing moral support and physical protection for young protesters.
A pastor volunteering with Protect the Children walks among protesters during pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong.

by JUNE CHENG in Hong Kong
photo by KIRAN RIDLEY
On the road in front of the luxury mall Pacific Place in the central business district of Hong Kong, hundreds of young pro-democracy protesters, wearing hard hats and gas masks, began to yell and run in retreat. Behind them, tear gas canisters arched through the sky, leaving trails of white smoke. As police fired rounds of the acrid gas, members of an elite police squad known as raptors suddenly charged at protesters from both the main and side roads. Groups of half a dozen officers, covered head to toe in protective gear, targeted individual protesters, beating them with batons and roughly pinning them to the ground.

In minutes, the road was cleared of most protesters and occupied by hundreds of riot police and subdued demonstrators. From the sidewalk, an 82-year-old man with gray hair, a cane, and a yellow “Protect the Children” vest strode over to the police waving his cane, scolding officers for treating the protesters so violently. Known to protesters as Uncle Wong, he begged to get the protesters’ names to connect them with legal counsel, but the police urged him back to the sidewalk, pointing a can of pepper spray at his face. Wong had no choice but to comply.

“The heavens can see what you’re doing, the heavens are watching. Please, have some humanity!” Wong wailed at the dozens of riot police that had gathered around him, their faces hidden behind reflective helmet visors. “Why don’t you just beat me to death here? I can’t tolerate this. This isn’t Hong Kong, this is hell.” Fellow volunteers with Protect the Children eventually led the visibly shaken Wong away from the police.

Made up of mostly middle-aged and elderly volunteers, Protect the Children is a church-run group that tries to mediate between police and protesters, sometimes by physically standing between the two. At other times, they distract police to help protesters evade capture, provide protesters with aid and supplies, or offer emotional support. Roy Chan, the founder of the group and the pastor of Good Neighbor North District Church, said that although the group’s membership is not limited to Christians, it’s goal is to care for the young protesters and to love them sacrificially as Jesus does.

The protests began as opposition to an extradition bill the Hong Kong government has since withdrawn. Protesters are now focused on calling for an investigation into police brutality, fighting the Chinese Communist Party’s encroachment on Hong Kong’s autonomy, and demanding direct elections in Hong Kong. As the mass protests entered their fifth month, violence had escalated on both sides: Some protesters threw bricks and Molotov cocktails at police, while police shot an 18-year-old protester in the chest on Oct. 1, the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The violence increases the risks for Protect the Children, which has between 40 and 80 volunteers at each protest. But Wong believes it’s a job he must do.

“[The protesters] are fighting for freedom, human rights, and democracy—it’s not for their own self-interest,” Wong said. “They’re giving up their time, their blood, and their lives… If we don’t help them, there will be no Hong Kong left.”

On the morning of Sunday, Sept. 29, Chan started his day leading a church worship service in a cramped walk-up apartment in Sheung Shui, a neighborhood near the Chinese border. He strummed a guitar and led 20 church attendees in the worship song

Uncle Wong acknowledges protesters.
“I Sing Praises to Your Name.” Around him were piles of storage bags full of gas masks, helmets, and goggles for protesters.

As Chan prayed for God to bring justice and hope amid Hong Kong’s dark days, several church members cried softly, dabbing their eyes with tissues.

The morning’s sermon looked at the story of Lazarus and the rich man from Luke Chapter 16, as Chan asked, “What is the difference between a person and an object?” The topic was pertinent to the church: A week earlier, a member of Protect the Children became separated from the group and was surrounded by police in an alley. A blurry video showed police swarming and kicking him as he lay on the ground. But police official Vasco Williams, when asked about the incident, said that the video appeared to show “an officer kicking a yellow object on the ground” and that he wasn’t sure what the object was.

Another, clearer video revealed it was really a man on the ground. Chan said the Protect the Children volunteer had bleeding gums and dizziness from the encounter. Many decried the police force’s dehumanization of protesters and aid workers.

In the sermon, Chan pointed out that the rich man ignored Lazarus’ needs, treating him more like an object than a human. He also warned pro-democracy supporters against turning their anger at injustice into hatred of people on the other side.

Afterward, one middle-aged congregant said he found it challenging to be a Christian, since he didn’t see justice and felt hopeless. Another attendee, a woman wearing a Protect the Children shirt, responded that Christians need to hope...
in God’s sovereign will and His control of the future. She admitted she also faced moments of discouragement and depression, “but we must find time to pray, read the Bible, sing hymns, and hold on to God tightly.”

As parishioners trickled out the door, Chan dressed himself in body armor and strapped on packs full of gear for that afternoon’s protest. That weekend proved a busy one: On Saturday activists held a rally marking the fifth anniversary of the Umbrella Movement; on Sunday protesters held an anti-totalitarianism march; and on Tuesday, China’s National Day, protesters held six different rallies in various Hong Kong districts. That meant Chan and the Protect the Children volunteers had little rest between protests.

Chan founded Good Neighbor Church in 2014 after leaving his position at a megachurch in the nearby city of Fanling and feeling that the church wasn’t doing enough to help the poor and the marginalized. As he examined issues of poverty, he concluded that the root cause was often unfair policies that stemmed from Hong Kong’s undemocratic government system and ultimately benefited the rich. With a background in social work, Chan began to provide shelter for the homeless and to advocate for impoverished street cleaners and farmers illegally evicted from their land.

During this summer’s pro-democracy protests, Chan and about 10 others went on a hunger strike starting July 3 after seeing the despair among young protesters, many in their teens or 20s, as the government repeatedly ignored their demands. Chan believed this desperation would lead young people to commit acts of violence or even suicide. He wanted to show young people a more positive way to channel their energy, and to show them that the older generation cared for them and was willing to suffer for them.

They held a hunger strike for 19 days, urging the government to agree to Hong Kong citizens’ democratic demands, including universal suffrage and an independent investigation into police actions. As the days wore on, they decided that rather than just sitting there on a hunger strike, they could do more good reaching out to the protesters with love and warmth and trying to ensure that no one got hurt.

Chan issued an open call to anyone interested in joining, and 200 people showed up on July 21. Afterward their numbers dropped as the danger increased. At first, the police largely treated them with respect—the volunteers would reason with the police, hand them flowers, and ask them not to attack. Police responded politely, saying, “Old man, go home before things get dangerous.”

But as the protests became increasingly violent, police started treating the volunteers roughly, calling them cockroaches, pointing guns at them, and pushing and kicking them.

After Sunday’s service, Chan scarfed down a pastry before hopping on a van headed to Hong Kong Island, where the anti-totalitarianism march was planned. Police had announced a ban on the event, and along the road they had formed checkpoints to try to stop protesters from reaching the site.

At Admiralty subway station, about 60 Protect the Children volunteers assembled. After a pastor led them in prayer, they split up into groups of seven, each with a team leader who wore an earpiece to receive directions from the group’s control center. Volunteers at the control center would follow social media and local livestream feeds to inform
leaders where police were positioned, where protesters were headed, and where the volunteers could be the most help.

Some of the teams typically head to sensitive areas, such as police headquarters, to watch and see if police stationed on footbridges decide to fire tear gas on peaceful protesters. If anything does happen, they’ll use microphones to direct demonstrators out of the line of fire and help wash their eyes with saline solution. Other teams head directly to the front lines, where police and protesters clash.

On that day, Uncle Wong’s group first headed out onto the roads where protesters were peacefully marching. The team handed out water, drink coupons, and supplies like gloves or arm sleeves. Many of the young protesters approached Wong and the group to thank them for their service. As the team moved closer to the front lines, where police had already fired tear gas, the leader instructed the volunteers to put on their hard hats, goggles, and gas masks. As Uncle Wong walked in the front of the group, protesters on either side of the road applauded and cheered.

The team came across a panicking European family that had come to Hong Kong on vacation and gotten stuck in the middle of the protest. (Buses had stopped running, and many shops and certain subway stations were closed.) Protect the Children volunteers directed the family members to areas of safety. When a young woman approached the group crying in distress, one of the middle-aged female volunteers pulled her in for a hug.

With a handheld microphone, the team leader, a petite woman with glasses and a ponytail, informed protesters of what was happening farther down the road, urging those without protective gear to head back. Soon after, the tear gas descended, the raptors charged at protesters, and Wong took his stand.

That afternoon, another Protect the Children team stood holding hands in between police and protesters. Tear gas and water cannons had cornered protesters into a space next to a subway station, and the closed metal gates blocked their way out. With the volunteers blocking police, some of the protesters were able to secretly escape by lifting a gate and crawling under it.

Later that night Wong met up with another Protect the Children volunteer, 72-year-old Chan Ki-kau, known as...
Uncle Chan. Chan, too, is a fixture at the protests, often wearing a red hat bearing the name of his town, Ma Shi Po. A week earlier, he had tried negotiating with police, asking for the name of an arrested protester so volunteers could provide a social worker to follow up. But according to Chan, another group of police came over and pepper-sprayed Chan in the face and shoved him so that he fell to the ground. “I haven’t thanked the police for the pepper spray yet,” he said with a cheeky smile that exposed missing teeth. “I usually don’t eat spicy, but that night I did.”

Uncle Chan (no relation to Roy Chan) was born in Hong Kong before moving as a toddler to Guangzhou in mainland China. He recalls his family’s poverty during the Great Leap Forward, a time in which tens of millions of Chinese people starved to death. Because his father ran a small business selling rice, his family was deemed capitalist and authorities tortured his father to death while Chan was in elementary school.

“At that time who could speak out?” Chan asked, tears falling at the thought of his father’s death. “You can’t resist it, no matter how much you suffer, you couldn’t speak out. All you can do is to keep suffering.”

After his father died, Chan worked odd jobs to provide for the family, working in construction and loading cargo onto trains. Once China began opening to the outside world in the 1980s, he moved back to Hong Kong, working at a dried seafood store then renting land to farm in Hong Kong’s north district. Chan liked Hong Kong: There, he no longer felt constrained and could enjoy freedoms.

Yet for the past 20 years, Chan has been fighting land battles in Ma Shi Po, where the government plans to take farmland to develop high rises. The development project would displace 1,500 households, including Chan’s.

Through his battle to maintain his farmland, he got to know Pastor Roy Chan, and this year he joined the hunger strikers and decided to become involved with Protect the Children. “I don’t know about politics, but when there’s injustice, I step up,” he said. Currently he’s upset to see the Hong Kong government and its “big boss” in Beijing using the police to subdue the people and strip away their rights. On the night of Sept. 29, he confronted a group of police who were arresting two teenage protesters. Uncle Chan and other Protect the Children volunteers asked for their names, and one of the boys responded. Chan then asked the police for their ID numbers, which are supposed to be visible on their uniforms for civilians to file complaints. But the police refused to answer, and the ID numbers were nowhere to be seen.

“There’s no one for me to report you to,” Chan said as he filmed the police on his phone. “Hong Kongers are suffering. Who can we go to?”

Pastors wearing orange vests with Jesus fish on the back have also joined Protect the Children. Gary Lau, a Lutheran pastor, said he volunteers because the Bible teaches that Christians should go to where injured people are. Through Protect the Children, he helps protesters get out of dangerous situations and also provides emotional support: Some youth are traumatized by the violence, others have been disowned by their parents because of their involvement, and others struggle with depression.

Most Hong Kong churches are passive in the protest movement, but Lau says, “If we view the current situation as a war, then we need to reflect on the role pastors should play during wartime.” He points to the Good Samaritan, who disregarded his status and position in order to help a
person who hated him. “That’s why we think the church should be the Good Samaritan, this is a position of faith, not politics.”

Some churches that spoke out at the beginning of the protests grew quieter as the violence escalated, according to Roy Chan. He admitted that some face internal disagreements about the protests and feel constraints about how they can help, but he feels many churches are overly concerned about their safety.

“If everyone is afraid, then no one has any voice to tell the government that they are doing something wrong,” Chan said. “I don’t want Hong Kong to become North Korea or mainland China. In the Bible it says that perfect love drives out fear. What we need to fear is God.”

As the protests have increased in frequency, Roy Chan’s days have become increasingly hectic. The day before the Oct. 1 protests, his phone received four calls in five minutes as he scarfed down a KFC dinner while speaking with me. At one point during the interview, he looked at his ringing phone and apologized that he needed to answer the call.

The caller was a young protester asking Chan to pray for him. The youth planned to go out as a front-line protester the next day and was overwhelmed with fear that he would be killed by police. After chatting and praying for him, Chan hung up the phone and cried. He said it was difficult to deal with the suffering of these young people and know he was so limited in how he could help.

But he also acknowledged that some moments make him realize the work is worthwhile: After helping the marchers on Sunday, a young protester turned to him and said, “When I see you, I see Jesus.”
A CLIMATE OF INSECURITY
In his 20s, a man we shall call Bill read that Turkey was the largest least-evangelized country in the world. He thought about Paul, the disciple of Jesus Christ, who described in Romans 15 a vision of seeing the entire Mediterranean world—“from Jerusalem to Illyricum”—evangelized. And he adopted it as his own calling, to go where “those who have never been told of Him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”

More than 30 years ago, Bill with his wife and young child left America and moved to Turkey. They took up a variety of day jobs while working alongside Turkey’s fledgling Protestant community, teaching, planting churches, and translating Bible texts. They put down roots, learning the language, making friends, and having more children. They became legal residents with valid visas renewed periodically, most recently in March this year. “There was never any question about our status or work,” he said.

That changed this summer. As Bill and his wife left the country to meet their now-adult children for a family vacation, a border official processing his passport (Turkey requires an exit stamp for those departing) set down her tea and called a supervisor. “He has an N-82 that is active,” she said. “What should I do?”

The N-82 code meant Bill’s visa to live in Turkey was voided because he could be a threat to national security. It meant he’d be deported or banned from reentry.

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, such measures have been adopted to punish residents ever since he declared a state of emergency in 2016 following an attempted coup. The government lifted the state of emergency in July 2018, but continues to deploy extrajudicial measures—even though the constitution provides for freedom of belief and prohibits religious discrimination.

Bill’s departure means, most likely, he won’t return.

Turkey is deporting Christian workers and church leaders, despite bowing to U.S. pressure one year ago in releasing American Pastor Andrew Brunson

BY MINDY BELZ

Andrew Brunson, in red tie and glasses, upon his release from two years’ detention in Turkey
EMRE TAZEGUL/AP
This year authorities have slapped N-82s on dozens of foreigners, revoking valid visas without warning and banning them from Turkey. An estimated 50 Protestants have been forcibly expelled, including several dozen Americans.

Despite the crackdown, at last month’s UN General Assembly in New York, President Donald Trump praised President Erdogan at a summit on religious freedom organized by the United States. Flanked by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Vice President Mike Pence, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Trump said Erdogan “has become a friend of mine” and highlighted his role in “a very short and respectful negotiation” for the release of American Pastor Andrew Brunson.

Brunson, who attended the New York event, was jailed under Turkey’s emergency laws in a two-year ordeal starting in 2016. A Turkish court tried him on unsubstantiated charges in highly publicized proceedings last year. In the end, a three-judge panel convicted Brunson of aiding terrorism. He was released to U.S. authorities and flown to Andrews Air Force Base last October. Diplomatic negotiations succeeded only after U.S. sanctions and tariffs sent Turkey’s lira spiraling down.

Since that time, Turkey’s Protestant community—about 6,000 mostly Muslim converts to Christianity who meet in 150 fellowships—has reported an increase of crimes against churches. Perhaps unbeknownst to the White House, the leaders of four Protestant congregations in Izmir—where Brunson served as pastor of Resurrection Church—have been forced out of Turkey since Brunson’s case ended.

Turkish pastors attended Brunson’s trial, and some were outspoken in support of his innocence. Afterward, state-owned media carried propagandistic campaigns against their churches. At Christmastime, billboards carried anti-Christian slogans.

A report from the Association of Protestant Churches notes that “a climate of insecurity has reigned in the small Protestant community” as a result of the Brunson case and that the expulsion of foreigners has meant a loss of leadership and training.

Like Brunson, who served with his wife Norine in Turkey for 23 years, those who’ve been expelled in recent months have decades of experience in Turkey. They lived in many different parts of the country, and some managed prospering businesses. A number of them own property. Most are pastors or lay leaders who work as volunteers within the Protestant community.

The ones who spoke to WORLD are not named due to their ongoing cases and because some have family members remaining in Turkey. All say they had not encountered problems with Turkish authorities before. And, despite requests to Turkey’s Ministry of Interior and to consular officials in the United States and other countries, they’ve received no formal notification for their forced departures.

“We had not the best family vacation,” Bill told me. After departing Turkey, he contacted a lawyer to request reinstatement of his residence permit, a case that’s pending. Bill’s wife, whose visa remained valid, flew back to Turkey, packed their belongings, and closed their home. She settled finances, said goodbye to friends, and rejoined Bill in the United States. A ruling in his case could be years away, he learned.
Meanwhile, he told me, “Our 34 years in Turkey have come to an abrupt end.”

The expulsions affect not only Americans. At least three of those expelled are Germans, and others include citizens from Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, Britain, South Korea, Finland, and Iran, according to interviews and a report from World Watch Monitor.

German Hans-Jürgen Louven, 58, moved to Turkey 21 years ago and settled with his wife and infant daughter in the resort town of Mugla on the Aegean Sea. In August without warning he learned a routine application to renew his residency visa had been denied. Officials ordered him to leave Turkey within 10 days.

For decades Louven has worked as a tour agent, hosting international groups and restoring historic homes for guests. He worked with local officials to develop “culture and faith” tourism trips, promoting Biblical sites like Ephesus, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (current-day Pamukkale). All along, he told World Watch Monitor, he asked for permission and obeyed local laws and customs. His office displays framed commendations from Turkish officials, including for his “valuable contributions” to the community.

Besides owning his home, Louven runs a farm in Mugla. There he even has prepared his own gravesite because he expected to die and be buried in Turkey.

“We are living here as Christians,” Louven said in a YouTube video about his deportation, “and I suppose it’s for our witness of living for the Lord.”

Louven mounted a campaign against the order, hiring a Turkish lawyer, filing a petition in local courts, and collecting 1,330 signatures at Change.org challenging his ouster. Already his wife had traveled to Austria to care for her hospitalized mother. His departure would mean leaving alone his daughter, a university student and English teacher. “I need to stand up against this,” he said.

As the deadline for Louven’s departure came and went while awaiting word on his case, police showed up unexpectedly to search his home and property. In the end, authorities refused his petition, though the case remains open. His forced departure took place on Sept. 12.

“These are targeted deportations,” said Andrew Brunson, now living in the United States. Brunson sees it as part of a trend starting in 2016 when he was ordered out of the country then jailed, along with deportations of American Christians Ryan Keating and David Byle. “Authorities pick some senior foreign leaders, people who had been long-term residents and in some cases involved in refugee work,” he said.

In June Brunson ended a long seclusion that followed his release last October and testified before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom—in large part, he said, due to his growing concern over the deportations. Brunson gave commissioners a list of deportees, including from the five churches in Izmir (including his own) that have lost senior leaders because foreign pastors have been kicked out. “This is close to half the churches in a city of 4 million,” he told the commission.

Since the Ottoman era, Turkey has formally recognized Orthodox, Catholic, and other traditional faiths, but it controls and limits their practice. The Armenian Apostolic Church, for instance, has been unable to elect a new patriarch since 2010 because Interior Ministry officials won’t approve it. Protestants do not have the same standing. They normally cannot receive religious worker visas and are barred from running their own educational programs. Most Protestant training is led by foreign workers on long-term residence visas.

Many of those being deported arrived in Turkey at a time when it actively sought favor from the West. In the 1990s the government lobbied hard to join the European Union, strengthened its standing in NATO, and endorsed many Western activities. Turkey’s Culture and Tourism Ministry encouraged Christian tourism, even sponsoring a series of tours promoting Turkey as the “other Holy Land.” (I attended one such tour in 1995.)

Since Erdogan founded the AKP Party in 2001, became prime minister in 2003, and was elected president in 2014, the government increasingly has become more anti-Western, nationalistic, and strictly Islamic.

Forcing out Christians once welcomed in Turkey is “part of a systematic attempt to eradicate this group of Christian workers,” said Aykan Erdemir, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a former member of Turkey’s parliament. Erdemir believes the campaign is rooted in “a toxic mix” of ultra-nationalism and Islamist-led conspiracies about the “Christian West.”

Beyond the well-being of Turkey’s Protestant Church, there’s also concern about Christian refugees in Turkey. About 10,000 Iranian Christians live as refugees in Turkey, estimates Rob Duncan, regional director of Middle East Concern, along with thousands of Iraqi, Syrian, and other Christians. As Western interface with these groups becomes more risky, their plight becomes more vulnerable. Plus, deportation for them could equal a death sentence.

Protestants continue to learn of new ousters. Duncan said at least 15 cases have come to his attention in recent weeks. “It’s important to address this as a legal situation, and to have Turkish authorities explain how these Christians are a threat,” he said. “There is a vague notion that Christians are a threat to national security. Why so suddenly are Protestants a threat to Turkish society? What have they done?”

Brunson—whose book on his experience, God’s Hostage, is due out in October—expects “very dark times to come” because Turkey “is careening in the wrong direction.” Brunson acknowledges, though, that his own imprisonment unleashed a prayer movement around the world focused on Turkey.

“Millions of people were praying for me, and those prayers served a greater purpose. That purpose is something far beyond setting me free, and it will continue.” 🙏
When staff members join Christ the King Community Church in Burlington, Wash., one of the largest churches in the United States, they sign onto the employee handbook, which has a tightly defined confidentiality clause. By signing, staffers agree never to discuss information “designated as confidential” such as “sensitive information regarding members” or donation records or discipline issues. The handbook is publicly available.

Makes sense, right? That is among the most mild, logical, and tailored of confidentiality agreements in the Christian ministry world—and unlike most confidentiality agreements, which often forbid employees from divulging their very existence, Christ the King members can read the agreement. Typically employees conform to these agreements on pain of loss of employment or severance, though employment laws and enforcement of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) vary by state.

NDAs appear to have started as a way to protect trade secrets in the tech industry in the mid-20th century, according to a Columbia Journalism Review history of the term, but companies quickly began using them to protect all sorts of information. NDAs were the reason the Harvey Weinstein scandals remained secret, because women signed confidentiality agreements as a condition of their settlements. And this practice from corporate America is now common among religious nonprofits.

Done right, confidentiality agreements help institutions protect members’ privacy and can fend off ruinous litigation. But NDAs can also mask institutional disease and leader misconduct. And even when an institution doesn’t enforce its NDA, the widespread institutional fear of liability can lead to unintended, devastating outcomes.

One employee at a Christian radio station showed me his non-disclosure agreement, which included a clause forbidding him from communicating “any information of any kind” relating to the radio station regardless of whether it is deemed confidential or important. The agreement also included a non-compete clause (see sidebar) forbidding him from working for another station within 30 miles during his employment and for six months after.

Open Doors USA used an NDA as a condition of three months’ severance for one of its employees, according to a document WORLD received. The NDA required the employee to promise not to make civil claims against the organization and included a non-disparagement clause forbidding both the employer and employee from making
disparaging comments “verbally or in writing, or mak[ing] any statements to the press or to any third party.” The agreement also forbade disclosing the existence of the agreement.

The employee signing the agreement felt little choice in the matter: “If I didn’t accept the agreement, we wouldn’t have been able to pay our bills.” Open Doors declined to comment on its NDA policy.

Even some employment lawyers who make a living off such agreements think the religious nonprofit world needs to weigh how they are used. Ed Sullivan is an employment lawyer and Catholic, and practices both in Houston. He has drawn up thousands of confidentiality agreements for companies.

“If you didn’t have confidentiality in settlements of lawsuits, you would have a non-functioning legal system in the United States,” said Sullivan. He explained that litigation is so expensive—estimating $50,000 on the low end for any sort of employment case, with cases often stretching into the six figures—that private settlements are the only way companies can stay in business without fielding infinite cases brought against them. In other words, if small settlements are public, it gives employees an incentive to sue, even if most of those settlements are for meritless claims that the company simply does not want to spend money litigating.

“But religious institutions—they’re different,” said Sullivan, who has watched what has happened in his church, as settlements have drained the church of billions of dollars. The diocese of Rochester, N.Y., filed for bankruptcy in September after the state approved a one-year look-back for abuse cases that may have passed the statute of limitations. “These [abuse] lawsuits strike to the core of who they are as an institution. … It’d be better for the institution in the long run” to make settlements public.

One night last year, Sullivan was sitting on his porch smoking a cigar and just “got mad” thinking about the Catholic abuse cases. In a pique, he wrote a letter to Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, urging him to ban confidentiality agreements in abuse settlements, unless the victim requested it.

Every settlement, he wrote, must be public and put on the USCCB website with the name of the offending clergyman, the amount of the settlement, and the date of the allegation. He thinks if the amount is published, reasonable people will be able to distinguish how serious the case was.

“If the [Cardinal Theodore] McCarrick settlements were disclosed to the public, then it is inconceivable that he would have been elevated to the position of cardinal or remained in the priesthood,” Sullivan wrote DiNardo. “It is no longer in the best interest of the church to hide her dirty laundry.”

The USCCB officially banned confidentiality agreements in abuse settlements in 2002, but Sullivan felt the original language of the ban could be manipulated to make the ban seem “discretionary.” And post-2002, dioceses have still left some settlements undisclosed, like some of the McCarrick cases. When I asked the spokesperson for the USCCB about this, he said I would have to ask individual dioceses for an explanation. The current version of the ban is more tightly written.

Such liability problems are now slamming evangelical churches. A devastating Houston Chronicle investigation this year unveiled more than 700 victims of sexual misconduct in Southern Baptist churches over the last 20 years and showed how abusers went freely from church to church.

“We know of churches and institutions that have written policies never to disclose the reason for a termination to anyone seeking a job reference,” Ben Wright, a Cedar Park–based pastor and an official with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, told the Chronicle. “The sole purpose of these policies is to minimize exposure to civil liability. But we are not ordinary businesses. We
Believe that it rests on us a moral obligation that demands more.

In response to the Chronicle’s revelations, Texas passed a law (composed with the help of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission) allowing nonprofits to disclose accusations of sexual misconduct of former employees or volunteers in “good faith” to current or prospective employers without fear of liability.

Someone who makes a bad faith or malicious accusation does not have protection from civil or criminal liability. In other words, if you intentionally slander someone, you could be criminally charged or civilly liable. Sullivan thought those were good safeguards: “Granting immunity from civil liability should be rarely done, and when it is done it should never be absolute, because that only serves to encourage reckless behavior.”

The Texas law only shields organizations in Texas. An employee reference from out of state, responding to a Texas church’s call, would not have the legal protection to share such information.

The same culture of confidentiality in churches about staff issues may have helped an alleged predator in South Carolina sink from one church to another. This instance underlined how difficult it is for ministries to prevent abuse when there is no criminal history to check and little information sharing between organizations because of fear of liability.

NewSpring Church, part of the Southern Baptist Convention, is one of the fastest-growing churches in the country with 15 campuses across South Carolina and about 23,000 in weekly attendance. It’s now facing lawsuits regarding its vetting of volunteer Jacop Hazlett, who worked in the church’s children’s ministry where he allegedly sexually abused children. South Carolina police say they have now identified 15 alleged victims of Hazlett, although it’s unclear if all of those victims are from NewSpring.

NewSpring said he passed the criminal background check that the church ran on him, as well as an in-person interview. The lawsuits say Cove Church and Elevation Church in North Carolina had turned him out of their children’s ministries out of concern for his behavior. Since 2016, NewSpring has had three other men accused of sexual misconduct with children.

Neither NewSpring, Elevation, nor Cove Church responded to requests for comment on the Hazlett case. Though NDAs don’t appear to have played a role in this case involving a volunteer, NewSpring uses NDAs, and Elevation also uses NDAs for staff and volunteers.

NewSpring’s spokesperson Suzanne Swift initially had told WORLD that the church does not use NDAs, but a former employee sent a copy of a NewSpring NDA he was required to sign as a condition of receiving severance. This particular agreement mentions Swift by name.

Asked about the discrepancy, Swift wrote back saying, “We don’t require staff to sign a specific NDA,” but said employees when they join must sign the employee handbook that includes “the expectation of confidentiality in some situations.”

The former employee said he was presented with the NDA and severance agreement two days before the end of the month, when his family’s health insurance would expire, so he felt he had no choice but to sign. The NewSpring NDA included a non-disparagement clause, that he would not disparage or “complain about” church staff and church members.

In his letter to Cardinal DiNardo about ending confidential settlements, Sullivan concluded: “If you wish the public to once again hold priests in high esteem, then dioceses should start by being 100 percent transparent with the public and 100 percent committed to letting justice prevail.”

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Fatherless and homeless

Too many kids in the foster system end up on the streets once they reach adulthood

BY SOPHIA LEE
photo by Greg Schneider/Genesis
When Keanakay Scott moved into her first apartment after aging out of foster care, nobody had taught her that she needed to pay rent every month. She assumed her first check would cover that expense. Less than two months later, she received an eviction notice. Scott could have paid her rent. She worked two jobs, cleaning rooms at a Holiday Inn during the day and working nights in a Target stockroom. But nobody had ever taught her how to manage her finances. She didn’t save money and had stacked utility and credit card bills in a pile because she didn’t know what they were. “I know that sounds so ridiculous, but I was 18, and I just didn’t know,” Scott recalled.

In the eyes of the court, she was a full-grown, independent adult. But practically speaking, she was still a kid, alone and unprepared for the real world—and her ignorant mistake led to severe consequences: With an eviction and bad credit record (she thought credit cards were “free money”), she couldn’t find a landlord willing to take a chance on her. For the next 11 years, she was homeless.

Scott is just one of thousands of foster kids who fall into homelessness each year. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, more than 20,000 youths age out of foster care each year, losing access to the support they’ve relied on through the child welfare system. Studies show that within a year of emancipation, about a quarter of these youths will experience homelessness. Within about four years, around half will become homeless.

Other statistics help explain why: Only half of aged-out foster youth find some kind of stable employment by the age of 24, and only half graduate from high school by age 18. Less than 10 percent of former foster youth earn a college degree. Young women who experience foster care are twice as likely to become pregnant by age 19. Foster kids are highly susceptible to predators: About 60 percent of child sex trafficking victims have been in the child welfare system. Many others fall into

substance abuse, crime, or imprisonment.

Scott’s story intersects with most of these statistics. She was 4 years old when social workers removed her and her four siblings from an abusive, drug-addicted mother and placed them in foster care. For the next 14 years, she bounced from home to home, getting kicked out repeatedly for behavioral outbursts that she later linked to her trauma from past abuse, abandonment, and sexual assault. At one point at age 11, she returned to her mother, who, Scott said, continued to physically abuse her.

One day, Scott said, she couldn’t take it anymore. She hit her mother back. She says her mother called the police and later told the court she never wanted her daughter back again.

The county sent Scott to a group home, where she stayed for five years until she aged out. That institutionalized setting didn’t prepare her for adulthood, Scott said: “I call it baby jail. It’s like mentally preparing you to be homeless. They tell you what to do, when to do it. It’s like jail!” She found a staff member she liked, but when Scott called that woman for help one evening, she said, the staffer told her not to call her after hours again.

At age 13, Scott began drinking. She was still drinking at 18 when she aged out of foster care. At work, she carried around a water bottle filled with gin that she sipped all day. For several years, she survived as a functioning alcoholic. One morning, she was too drunk to get up for work. The next morning, she was hungover again... then again, and again. One day, she just stopped going to work.

As tough and steely as she appeared to others, Scott ached for love. When a man first paid attention to her, she thought she’d found it: This man gave her physical touch and paid for her alcohol. After him came others: Whenever a man hit her or cheated on her, she thought, “Even my mom hit me. This man gives me something my mom can’t, so I’ll just deal with this.”
At 19, she gave birth to her first daughter. Scott promised her baby, “You will never go through anything I had to go through. ... I will protect you from bad things in life.”

It was easier said than done. The baby’s father was out of the picture, and six months after her daughter’s birth—and after getting kicked out of her mother’s house for the third time—Scott landed on Skid Row in Los Angeles.

For the next several years, Scott did everything she could to keep afloat: She panhandled while living on the streets. She worked in various restaurants and drove cabs, sometimes up to 100 hours a week. She begged people for child care. She lived in a van. She crashed on strangers’ couches. She knocked on the doors of shelters. She flew to Washington, D.C., to look for jobs, then to Alabama, to Texas, and back to California again. Meanwhile, she fell in love with the wrong man again and again, giving birth to two more daughters with two different fathers.

The life story of a homeless individual is messy and complicated. For foster youth, it always starts with an unstable family and lack of support when they make wrong choices, meet a crisis, or simply need a guiding hand.

In most families, a teenager has someone who helps him apply for college, provides moral support, and teaches life skills. Even after graduation, many young adults still rely on their parents or community to stay housed, find a job, and weather the unpredictable moments of life.

Most aged-out foster youths like Scott don’t have that “someone.” Many have been in the system for years and have no healthy, trusting relationship with any adult.

“Foster care is supposed to be a temporary, safe place for children,” said Wende Nichols-Julien, a foster parent and CEO of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Los Angeles. “We’re not using it as a temporary
We as a community have a moral responsibility to make sure they have safe families to live with. That’s how we avoid homelessness.”

Yet even as the number of children in foster care increases each year to more than 440,000 today, between 30 percent to 50 percent of foster parents drop out of fostering each year.

At Covenant House California (CHC), a non-profit in Los Angeles and Oakland that serves homeless and trafficked youth ages 18 to 24, about half of the young adults it serves are former foster youth. Every weekday, an outreach team from CHC visits with homeless youth on the streets.

I followed one team to Hollywood one evening. We stocked a van full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, turkey sandwiches, bags of chips, bottled water, blankets, donated clothes, and hygiene kits, then drove out to a small homeless encampment minutes away from the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

As our van pulled up to the curb, young faces popped out of tents with eager smiles. “We missed you!” cheered one 18-year-old woman named Destiny. A few minutes later, more young adults appeared on their skateboards and bikes. They grabbed sandwiches, pulled out clothes, and tried on sunglasses, chatting away like gossipy teenagers. Out of the six people I talked to, three told me they were former foster kids. One woman suffers from epilepsy, and another told me she sees and hears things and struggles with thoughts of suicide.

But they also have talents and dreams and something else rare among homeless adults: hope and optimism. One 27-year-old man from Minnesota showed me his sketchbook filled with drawings and paintings, telling me he was going to be an artist one day. Another guy told me he makes music, mostly R&B, and believes his talent will gain him eventual fame and success. Another boasted that he was a dancer. Another said he built an online business that earns him $880 a month.

Bill Bedrossian, CEO of Covenant House California, said he and his team use these young adults’ dreams as leverage to motivate them into independence. The longer they work with these youths, the more likelihood of success: Ninety percent of youths who go through CHC’s two-year transitional living programs are able to maintain their independence permanently. That’s why the outreach teams continue to hit the streets and talk to the same kids every day: It’s a way to show them that someone consistently cares for them, day after day, even if they might not be ready for a change yet.

The child welfare system has improved over the years: The number of kids staying in care for more than five years has dropped. More foster kids end up in adoption. Today, many states allow foster youth to continue in foster care until age 21, giving young adults more time to prepare for emancipation. Many child welfare agencies are also required to develop transition plans and provide “Independent Living Skills” classes that teach skills such as riding the bus, conflict resolution, and cooking.

But foster youth workers tell me those steps are not enough, and foster youth are still falling into homelessness. In Los Angeles, there aren’t enough transitional living programs, and foster youths tell me the county-sponsored independent living skills classes aren’t very helpful. Instead of using the extended support to prepare them for independence, some programs merely prolong state custody. Perhaps that’s because no program or apartment can replace the role of a loving parental figure.

Roxana Cadenas, a 21-year-old woman who recently aged out of foster care, told me that when she turned 19 the county moved her from a group home to transitional housing. Ideally, that should have helped her save money for future housing and provided a less-restrictive environment for her to learn real-life skills. But when she turned 21 and had to leave foster care for good, she still didn’t know how to budget, build a credit score, or look for a job.

When Cadenas applied for various apartments, none of the landlords accepted her because she had no credit score. She crashed at a friend’s house for a few days, then landed at CHC. When I met her, she had been living at CHC for eight months. (She’ll have to move out by age 24.) Outside of CHC, Cadenas has no social support: Her mother and stepfather are dead, and her father has been deported to Mexico. Her other relatives are also in Mexico.

Cadenas entered foster care at age 15 because of medical neglect: While living with her now-deceased mother, she had been visiting the

‘Even if everything in my life happened just to bring me to knowledge of who He is, it’s worth it.’

—Keanakay Scott
hospital for diabetes-related health issues often enough to catch the attention of social workers. When state officials intervened, Cadenas felt relieved: “I knew I needed help, but my mom wasn’t caring, and I wasn’t doing anything for myself. ... My mom didn’t care, so I didn’t care.”

Scott, now 29, still fights a similar spirit of neglect and abandonment. When she lost her disability insurance and didn’t have money for food, she punished herself by refusing to wash her face, telling herself she didn’t deserve to have good skin. She stopped eating healthy food and stopped working out, knowing those things also made her feel good.

For a long time, she didn’t tell anyone her thoughts and feelings, thinking no one would care. At shelters, she locked herself up in her room with her daughters and refused to engage with other people. When someone gave her a pair of shoes that she needed for work, she became angry: The gift was another reminder that she was a human being with needs. She hated that she had so many needs.

With years of therapy and prayers, Scott gradually realized she had been trying to prove to herself and others that she was worthy of love: “I didn’t know that God already loves me, that He’s been showing me that He loves me, that I’m worth loving all along.” Once the gospel truly made sense to her—that Jesus Christ died on the cross out of self-sacrificial love for her—she began discovering God’s love and blessings everywhere: “It’s amazing. Even if everything in my life happened just to bring me to knowledge of who He is, it’s worth it.”

The last time I visited Scott at her one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, she had begun hitting the gym regularly again. A whiteboard hanging in her kitchen reminds her of the bills she needs to pay, her workout regimen, therapy sessions, and weekly Bible study meetings. “Be kind to yourself and the healing process,” she’d written on the whiteboard.

Just a day before, she’d finally confronted a friend who had hurt her eight months ago. Before, she would have bottled up her feelings and nursed a grudge. But a sermon about humility convicted her to call her friend.

When that friend immediately apologized, Scott burst into tears. She hadn’t expected such quick and genuine grace: “I’m learning to be receptive to the people God has already sent me. God is showing me, ‘Things are going to be different from what you’re used to. Because now you have Me.’”
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EMBRYO ADOPTIONS ARE INCREASINGLY POPULAR THANKS IN PART TO A GOVERNMENT GRANT CREATED BY AN UNLIKELY SENATOR by Charissa Koh

The first “snowflake baby” was born in 1998. Hannah Strege, conceived in a petri dish and placed into frozen storage for two years, had been implanted as an embryo into the womb of Marlene Strege. The two were not biologically related, but Marlene had chosen to adopt this embryo with the help of Nightlight Christian Adoptions, a group that coined the term “snowflake babies” to describe the more than 100,000 frozen embryos then stored at fertility clinics across the United States. American couples had created the embryos with the help of in vitro fertilization: Those parents would typically choose to implant, discard, or donate the embryos to stem cell research.

When Hannah was born, embryonic stem cell research was a hot topic in Washington. Advocates anticipated cures for cancer and Alzheimer’s, but opponents argued that if life begins at conception, research that destroys human embryos should be off limits. Debate raged in Congress, and in August 2001 President George W. Bush said federally funded researchers could use existing embryonic stem cell
lines but not new ones. The 9/11 attacks soon tore the country’s focus away from stem cell research.

In December 2001, Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, a pro-abortion Republican at the time, created a $1 million grant to raise public awareness of embryo adoption. He added the funding to a Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) spending bill at the last minute, after months of loudly supporting research using embryos. “He was an unlikely person to be adding [the grant],” former Nightlight President Ron Stoddart recalled. But pro-life groups were arguing more people would donate their embryos to adoption if they only knew they could. Specter told the Associated Press the grant would be a test: “Let us try to find people who will adopt embryos and take the necessary steps.” Stoddart said he suspected that if interested families did not come forward, Specter would have kept pushing embryonic stem cell research.

HHS first awarded the grant in 2002, and it has done so every two to three years since. Almost all recipients are Christian organizations. As pro-lifers predicted, interest in embryo adoption has grown along with awareness, from that first birth in 1998 to thousands today.

Nightlight received the grant from the beginning. In 2007, Kimberly Tyson came on staff to manage the embryo adoption program grants. She said the government funds let Nightlight hire a public relations firm to get stories of their families into several publications. Over 650 babies have been born so far through Nightlight’s adoption program.

Bethany Christian Services applied for and received the grant from 2006 to 2009. In 2011, Bethany created a separate embryo adoption entity called the National Fertility Support Center (NFSC), which received the grant from 2014 until the present. CEO Debra Peters said that thanks to the money, increasing numbers of clients have come for counseling. NFSC used the funds to educate fertility clinics, doctors, and patients about embryo adoption, as well as to raise awareness through advertising.

Another recipient is the National Registry for Adoption (NRFA), launched in 2014. In 2017, the organization used grant funds to advertise its services, run focus groups, and conduct a survey. Over the next two years, the NRFA counseled a total of 1,200 families. Co-founder Charis Johnson said the survey revealed “a significant increase in embryo donation awareness, and people…going all the way through the process” by donating or adopting.

The grant to raise awareness of embryo adoption worked. But govern-ment money usually comes with strings attached.

“You definitely have guidelines and rules that you have to follow, but Nightlight hasn’t had any issues following those rules,” said Kimberly Tyson. “You have to tone down the religious aspect of it.” For example, she runs an embryo adoption website that uses grant money but is separate from Nightlight’s main website: “We’re not ashamed of Christ on our Nightlight website. It’s not funded by the federal government.”

The National Embryo Donation Center (NEDC) received the grant between 2008 and 2013. Mark Mellinger, marketing and development director, said the money allowed the organization to advertise and send staffers out to teach fertility doctors about embryo adoption. The NEDC applied for the grant multiple times after 2013, but the rules changed: The 2015 grant announcement contained a new section that said “grantees must treat same-sex spouses, marriages, and households on the same terms as opposite-sex spouses, marriages, and households.” NEDC requires couples who use its program to be heterosexual and married at least three years. The organization has facilitated the births of 868 children so far through embryo adoption.

Today many groups, Christian and other, offer embryo adoption. Records from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that the number of transfers of donated frozen embryos increased from 5,250 in 2007 to 13,460 in 2016, the most recent year in which figures are available. But the same data show increasing numbers of IVF procedures as well. Though more people are adopting them than ever, between 600,000 and 1 million embryos are still frozen in the United States, waiting to be born.
The antechamber of the Mesquite Library in Phoenix, Ariz., is full of natural light and potted palms. Sporting a ball cap, Valerie Jones strides through, but turns back to give her opinion on library fines. Would a library without overdue book fines help her? “Yes!”

Jones has a 6-year-old son who checks out 20 to 30 books at a time. She encourages his appetite, but when it’s time to return the books, it’s impossible to find them all. Whatever she doesn’t return incurs a fine. Her library account is blocked, and she can only afford to pay in installments. The result: Her son stops checking out books.

Starting in November, this will no longer be a problem. The “All Fines Forgiven” initiative at Phoenix Public Library branches such as Mesquite will remove daily fines for overdue books and forgive existing balances. Patrons still have to pay a replacement fee after 50 days, but if they return the book, the fee is waived.

Phoenix isn’t the first city to end library fines, but it is the biggest so far. About 200 other library systems in the United States have become fine-free. In January, the American Library Association passed a resolution encouraging all libraries to do so.

Eliminating fines evokes a mixed response from patrons. Some, like Jones, welcome the idea. Others, mostly older patrons, worry people will become irresponsible and stop returning books. (Nobody seems to anticipate personally becoming the problem.)

Phoenix is the county seat of Maricopa County, and the county library system, which went fine-free in May, reports no problems with book hoarders yet. Other libraries generally report that removing fines actually increases circulation. Their position: People recognize the value of a library, are responsible, and understand they are borrowing.

Phoenix Public Library spokeswoman Lee Franklin says fines disproportionately affect low-income households and those without books. She has seen parents who bring children to the library to read but tell them, “We can’t take that home.” She hopes removing a potential financial barrier will make books more accessible.

Yolanda J., who works at a Phoenix branch in a low-income area, agrees: Patrons approach her desk to ask what fines they owe. Often when they hear their balance, they turn around and leave. But patron Doyle Magouirk, who wears a gray beard, has a different perspective: When he goes overdue, he keeps the book until he accrues a large fine. When he gets his monthly paycheck, he pays his fines: “That’s how I donate to the library.” Right now he owes $11.50 and intends to pay before the fine is forgiven.

Carol Romanchuk is happy to see fines disappear because she’s always late, and the money doesn’t directly benefit the library: “I used to think it went toward new books, but then I learned it just went to the general fund, so what’s the point?”

Romanchuk is right. Phoenix Public Library currently collects about $200,000 a year for overdue books, money that goes into the city’s general fund. The Maricopa County library system, funded by property taxes, already has a program to help municipal libraries. When Phoenix joins the fine-free movement, the county will supply the city’s libraries an additional $170,000. So, since money in the city general fund may not return to the library system, the new policy might help it financially.

Still, the next time politicians propose raising taxes to help libraries, voters will know they’ve already given up one revenue source.

—Victoria Johnson is a graduate of the World Journalism Institute mid-career course
On a cloudy Saturday morning here in May, around 30 young people in matching T-shirts gathered under a bridge, armed with posters on mental health. They walked across the city for more than an hour, backed by music from two loudspeakers. The group handed out emergency contact cards to passersby and occasionally chanted, “Speak your mind!” and “Better health for all!”

A local nonprofit, Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative, or MANI, organized the march across seven of Nigeria’s 36 states. In Abuja, the movement was timely: Stories were making the rounds on social media about two young men who separately committed suicide one day apart in May.

The cases are among a rising number of publicized suicide attempts across the country. Groups like MANI are stepping in to combat stereotypes surrounding mental health and to inform people about available assistance.

Victor Ugo founded MANI in 2016 out of his own personal struggles. Two years earlier, he was a medical student at a Nigerian university when he started to feel dispirited and unmotivated. “I wasn’t reading. I wasn’t sleeping. I lost interest in everything.”

His friends and some of his professors intervened and encouraged him to see a doctor, who diagnosed him with major depressive disorder. He started treatment and therapy and began to recover, but decided he wanted more than just his own healing.

“If I could go through this, then what about everyone else who didn’t have the same access or friends that I had?”

According to government officials, 3 in 10 Nigerians suffer from a mental health disorder. The World Health Organization says Nigeria has the 15th-highest number of reported suicide cases in the world, in an age-standardized tally.

Ugo launched the nonprofit with a focus on young people. It has so far offered as many as 10,000 suicide interventions. Trained counselors on call provide five free sessions to people who request help on the organization’s website. Offline, MANI hosts events, like its “conversation cafés” across 10 states. Those events involve difficult conversations with participants on issues such as mental health stigmas.
Last year, the group tracked down and stopped someone from committing suicide at a beach in Lagos just as he was walking into the water.

“We got him out, then he snatched the gun from a policeman,” Ugo recalled. “I had to go get it from him. It was such a scary moment.”

On May 13, Chukwuemeka Akachi—a college senior—committed suicide following months of dark Facebook posts that documented his struggle with depression. The next day, Michael Arowosaiye, a worship leader at a church in Abuja, hung himself.

In January, a Lagos-based DJ poisoned himself with insecticide after posting a suicide message on Instagram. The Police Rapid Response Squad in Lagos has increased its patrol along the Third Mainland Bridge over the past year due to multiple suicide attempts.

In most cases, the suicidal ideation seems to stem from psychiatric conditions like depression and anxiety, as well as alcohol and drug abuse. Environmental factors such as rising urbanization, economic uncertainty, and unemployment also add to the mix, Ugo said. With more suicide stories publicized on social media, copycat incidents are on the rise, with many cases involving an insecticide called “Sniper.”

Zunzika Thole-Okpo with the Abuja-based Gede Foundation said many suicidal people remain quiet due to the social stigma surrounding mental illness. She pointed to the negative comments that flooded several of Akachi’s posts on his Facebook page.

“People’s responses would make anyone going through the same thing think twice, like ‘Why would I seek for help if they’re talking to somebody that’s asking for help this way?’”

The foundation hopes to change that trend and has partnered with U.K.-based Basic Needs to educate Nigerians on mental health disorders. Gede has also worked with local and religious authorities and healthcare providers to identify patients and provide treatment.

Thole-Okpo said such partnerships have proven essential, especially in cases where misguided religious beliefs contribute to the stigma. “We had a case where a woman was tied to a pole inside a church for over three years because she was schizophrenic, and they were just praying for her, thinking she had demons.”

After losing a friend to suicide in 2013, Christian Pastor Smart Chongo started to organize campaigns and received training in professional counseling. Three years later, he launched a hotline service under the Smart Suicide Prevention Initiative.

Today, he said, the group receives more than 5,000 calls nationwide each month. As a pastor, Chongo acknowledges the link between mental health concerns and religion. When people call in, he connects them with psychological centers, prayer groups, or Islamic clerics, depending on their background.

Yet he noted the need for balance. “If you are sick, you need medical attention and prayers,” he said. “I believe you going for tests to know exactly what’s wrong would help you pray better.”

In Abuja’s Mpape district, Bitrus Luka first started to receive treatment and counseling for epilepsy three years ago. His family had tried different traditional medicines that failed to work. People avoided him because of his seizures, fearing he was possessed or contagious. “I would feel depressed,” he said.

Luka now belongs to one of several local support groups Gede has created, and shares his story with other group members. The participants educate their community and contribute money each month to assist each other with subsidized medication prescriptions.

As more suicide cases get attention online, Ugo said, people need accurate information beyond the initial buzz of hashtags that spring up and quickly die down with each incident. He hopes for mental health lessons to be included in school curricula and for advocacy groups at universities.

“What we really need to increase is not mental health awareness,” he said. “We need to increase mental health literacy.”

Thole-Okpo noted it’s also important to push out hotlines for help when people discuss mental health or share stories online. In the comment section on Akachi’s page, she noticed one person asking for help.

“Maybe they were just trolling, but I shared some help lines. I hope they take them seriously.”

Clockwise from lower left: Activists in Abuja encourage open dialogue about mental health issues; young people march to end the silence on mental health; Bitrus Luka.
Evenings find Paul Leclair cleaning the university campus in his custodian job in Bloomington, Minn. But Leclair, age 55, has another vocation: reaching the Hmong for Jesus.

He’d never heard of the Hmong until 1996, when he spoke to a co-worker from a group of foreigners whose home country he couldn’t place. He’d noticed how diligently and quietly they worked, but how lively they acted together at lunch. Leclair bluntly asked, “Who are you? Where are you from? Why are you here?”

The man replied, “My name is Shua. We are Hmong. We are from Laos. And we are here because of the war.”

When Leclair queried, “What war?” the man just stared at him with hurt and anger, turned, and walked away. Stunned by his response, Leclair determined to research all he could about these people.

Historians trace the Hmong to ancient China. After centuries of conflict with Chinese imperialism, many migrated into mountainous, rugged regions of nearby countries, including Laos.

Fast-forward to the 20th century: In the early 1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency began covertly recruiting Laotian Hmong to fight the spread of Vietnamese communism in Laos.

By 1973 communists had killed nearly 40,000 Hmong soldiers—an estimated quarter of Hmong males, including boys as young as 9. Tens of thousands of Hmong civilians also perished. The CIA didn’t acknowledge this 11-year “Secret War” until 1994. Even today, few Americans know of it.

After the United States pulled out of Laos, it airlifted top Hmong military officials to safety in Thailand. The remaining Hmong fled on foot as Laotian communists tried to exterminate them.

Many starved, died from diseases in jungles, or drowned crossing the Mekong River. Survivors escaped to refugee camps in Thailand where non-governmental organizations cared for and helped relocate thousands. In 1975, churches in Minnesota started sponsoring Hmong refugees.

When Leclair learned all this, he was devastated: “I was working with these people who seemed happy, but many … had experienced horrific things.” He says God developed in him great affection for the Hmong.

Over time he befriended his Hmong co-workers, helping them navigate paper-work and problems. He joined them for lunch, learning about their culture and the shamanistic animism practiced mainly by the older generation. He observed weddings and funerals. He discerned that though many attended mainline churches that sponsored them, few knew Christ.

Leclair taught himself to read and write Hmong, a language whose written component began in the 1950s by missionaries in Laos.

He struggled to speak this tonal language, and demonstrated for me one syllable that has eight meanings depending on inflection. Providentially, he met a young Hmong student who agreed to teach him to speak Hmong if Leclair would teach him to read and write it.

A Hmong professor at the University of Minnesota also volunteered to tutor him. During the two-year process Leclair taught her about Christianity.

Students at work asked him to be their Hmong language club adviser. He continues to help this new generation read and write their grandparents’ mother tongue. After one student graduated recently, she went through the Gospel of John with Leclair, confessed Christ, and now attends a Hmong Bible church.

Today Leclair teaches Bible classes at this same church, Redeeming Grace, that meets afternoons in the building his former church worships in on Sunday mornings. Redeeming Grace strives to unite three generations of Hmong by preaching and teaching sound doctrine in both English and Hmong.

Leclair cites Leviticus 19:34: “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and … love him.” More than 250,000 Hmong live in the United States. With the greatest Hmong metro population—about 80,000—living in the Twin Cities, Leclair sees many to love.
Lauris Shepherd was serving in the Army and stationed at Fort Benning in Georgia when he first discovered the Navigators, an interdenominational Christian disciple-ship ministry. Later he reconnected with the group after moving to San Diego to teach math at Point Loma Nazarene University. He realized, “Even though I’d grown up in the church and had a great foundation, it was the Navigators that really helped me get on a steady growth.” He decided he wanted to be involved in men’s ministry and began to work as an administrative assistant to the Navigators’ area director to get some training.

Around the same time, Rhonda came to the church Lauris attended. Though they’d met previously, Rhonda started noticing Lauris’ spiritual maturity and “handsome features.” They spent time together through the church’s singles group: “I would come up with suggestions on how to get the group together so I could be around her,” Lauris says. One night in September 1976, Lauris’ car pulled up next to Rhonda’s at a stoplight (“answer to prayer,” Lauris jokes), and he motioned for her to pull into the nearby McDonald’s. The couple dubbed that night their first date.

Lauris was 28 when he and Rhonda began dating. Previously, his parents and friends had expressed concern at his singleness, but he was content focusing on the Navigators ministry he led at the University of California, San Diego. In November, Lauris told Rhonda that she was the one for him—if he was supposed to get married. He asked if she was OK with that, and she replied that she didn’t know but thought she could trust God. Lauris’ decision came quickly: He proposed soon after, and they married in April 1977.

Eight years and four daughters later, the Shepherds moved to Japan with the Navigators to disciple members of the U.S. Navy. Not knowing the language, they faced culture shock and medical scares: They planned to have a baby at home with a Japanese midwife, but complications forced them to rush to a hospital to save the baby’s life. In their marriage, tension arose over money. The Shepherds raised financial support as missionaries but were underfunded when they arrived in Japan. Rhonda worked to stay within their limited income, but sometimes her purchases upset the extremely frugal Lauris. Eventually, they created a budget, and their communication about finances became smoother.

Lauris loved ministry but now admits he did not “know the language of compassion.” The Shepherds had eight kids, and he wondered why their six daughters told him their problems if he couldn’t fix them. Once, Lauris decided their oldest girl should attend an eight-week piano camp. The daughter pleaded not to go, but Lauris did not listen. The night before she left, Rhonda asked him if he was sufficiently sure of the decision to risk his daughter resenting him. Her words made him think. A week into the camp, he spoke with their daughter on the phone to repair their relationship.

Over time, his lack of compassion convicted him, and he thought, “Wow, that’s nothing like Jesus.” He apologized to each of his daughters for ways he might have hurt them. In parenting, he says, he’s relied heavily on Rhonda to understand the girls. His efforts seem to be paying off: Recently, Lauris took the StrengthsFinder personal assessment test and was surprised to see “empathy” as one of his top strengths. He says, “I just think that’s been learned, because God’s really working on me.”

Lifestyle

Learning the language of compassion

LAURIS SHEPHERD DEDICATED HIS LIFE TO DISCIPLING MEN, BUT COMPASSIONATELY LEADING HIS FAMILY WAS A DIFFERENT CHALLENGE by Charissa Koh
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Heartbreaking stories are not unique to Hondurans or Guatemalans, and the U.S. government cannot help them all. Let’s uphold the law.

—MAILA SOONG on Facebook

Great reporting. Thank you for remaining a compassionate conservative voice in this harsh political environment.

—JARRETT MEEK on Facebook

The majority of asylum-seekers come for a better life, not because they are threatened. I don’t have an answer for the people who really need asylum, and I am frustrated by the whole immigration policy dysfunction.

—PAUL HERVEY on wng.org

I think most Americans are willing to help immigrants, even if they are here illegally. But just secure the border. Please.

—BETH YOUNG / Herndon, Ky.

I ache over the injustice and hardship many suffer in other countries, but articles sympathetic to the plight of these people just play into the hands of those who would destroy our nation with open borders.

—KATHRYN LYDEN / Medical Lake, Wash.

Dilemma 2020

The 2020 election is not a choice between the “lesser of two evils.” I didn’t vote for a butterfly. I voted for a honey badger. This president has delivered.

—KATHY CONNORS / Medina, Wash.

Yes, he’s arrogant, and I wish he were a little more delicate in how he says things. But hold my nose to vote? No way! I will run to the polls and encourage others to do the same. The alternative is unthinkable.

—EB PREUMINGER / Asheville, N.C.

Thank you for taking an unpopular but honest stance. The hero worship of the president I have witnessed among evangelicals sickens me so much I won’t call myself an evangelical anymore.

—GAYLE ANNA JOHNSON on Facebook

I am beginning to develop an affection for Trump in spite of his abrasiveness. When others tried to disparage Ulysses Grant because of his drinking, Lincoln said, “I can’t spare this man, he fights.” I guess that assessment works for me.

—NOLAN NELSON / Eugene, Ore.

The “brand-new person” Belz hopes for probably wouldn’t last a year under the onslaught Trump has endured. The qualities some so dislike in Trump might be what has helped him withstand it. Who else will throw CNN out of press briefings?

—DEBORAH WINTER / Wayland, Mich.

I too am praying for someone better, but I think better candidates will only arise and be electable when we have a better electorate. Our nation needs revival more than anything else.

—DAVID MADIO on wng.org

The only way forward

Cheaney offers the standard white people’s solution: Black people should get their spiritual house in order and just forgive 400 years of injustice and disparities. Imagine Zacchaeus, when Christ called him, saying, “Let me call together my neighbors whom I have exploited so they can forgive me, then all will be well.” Our black brothers and sisters are right to call us to account.

—KRISTEN D. MEYER / Grand Rapids, Mich.

I so agree that the answer to the racial divide is spiritual. Surely it is time for us all to move forward in forgiveness and peace.

—ANN WESTERMAN / Vienna, Va.
**Mailbag • COMMENTS**

[Sept. 14, p. 68] I agree that we should not assume a “privileged” person is happy and healthy because of economic advantage; some of the most affluent people have broken lives. We need to go deeper and see all people as individuals.

—CAROLE JOHANSEN on Facebook

Too often wealthy or successful people believe that their position is the result of hard work or sacrifice and others don’t deserve success. While it is a blessing to live in a society that resembles a meritocracy in some ways, our context growing up makes a massive difference to the likelihood of our success.

—SIMEON ANDREWS on wng.org

“Privilege” is based on the false premise that taking one group down a notch necessarily brings other “underprivileged” groups up a notch. But Christ taught against envy and jealousy. Our progress should be measured in relation to what we’ve been given.

—DAVE RISSLER on Facebook

Will the International Herbert Marcuse Society Conference have a breakout session on how to create mass gravesites with bulldozers and machine guns?

—GREG BROWNING on wng.org

[Sept. 14, p. 34] I read the column about the United States possibly buying Greenland with dismay. Surely the country whose Declaration of Independence insists that people have a right to choose their own form of government should respect the sovereignty of another nation, however small in population. Greenland’s 60,000 inhabitants, mostly Inuit and Christian, should not be subjected to the whims and Arctic ambitions of a larger and more powerful nation.

—HOLLY JOHNSON / Valenta, Ontario

I was glad to see Mindy Belz’s column but disagree that Greenland is situated more strategically than Alaska.

Because of it, the United States is a member of the Arctic Council and controls critical stretches of the Northwest Passage. It is a formidable buffer between Russia, China, and the United States and home to important military facilities. America needs not more polar holdings, but greater appreciation of its Arctic role and responsibilities.

—EMILY GEBEL / Juneau, Alaska

**Cucumber time**

[Sept. 14, p. 10] I loved the Kierkegaard quotes. He was pretty big on Christian individualism, and I can’t imagine him subscribing to the modern political ethos that insists we pick a team.

—NATHAN CARPENTER on Facebook

**One woman’s legacy**

[Sept. 14, p. 52] I loved this article. I’ve seen the bronze statue in Calabar, Nigeria, of Mary Slessor holding twins. She continues to inspire missionaries and Nigerians to do what’s right in God’s sight.

—LOWELL A. WHITE on Facebook

Each month in our children’s ministry I introduce missionaries from the past who suffered greatly but were still obedient to God’s calling. I will be using this wonderful article. If you had only included coloring sheets, my work would be complete!

—GLORIA WATSON / Willow Springs, Mo.

**Funny family man**

[Sept. 14, p. 21] We watched the Jim Gaffigan special recently, and it is hilarious!

—NORM EDDY on Facebook

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Please include full name and address. Letters may be edited to yield brevity and clarity.

—Kevin Martin, publisher
When I was in child-raising mode, my mother phoned periodically. I never phoned her. God has given us sure principles to live by, and one of them is “with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38). Now it’s my turn to hear crickets, and to feel that each contact of mine is an interruption.

Last Easter dinner I made them all watch a comedy skit called “Mother” by Nichols and May. An excerpt:

“Hello, Arthur? This is your mother. … Remember me?”

“Mom, I was just going to call you! Is that a funny thing? Do you know that I had my hand on the phone and…”

“Arthur, you were supposed to call me last Friday.…”

“I know, I just didn’t have a second.…”

“Arthur, I sat by that phone all day Friday.…”

“I was working.…”

“And all day Saturday…”

“I was in the lab and…”

“And all day Sunday. And your father finally said to me, ‘Phyliss, eat something or you’ll faint.’ I said, ‘No, Harry, no. I don’t want my mouth to be full when my son calls me.’ And you never called.”

“Mom, I was sending up a rocket! I didn’t have a second!”

“Well, it’s always something, isn’t it?”

I thought it was hilarious. I turned around and nobody was laughing.

The introduction of the cell phone has added a layer of complexity not experienced by pre–baby boomers. In the past, lifting the receiver and dialing 10 slow consecutive circular or semi-circular motions on a heavy stationary German coiled phone entailed more of a physical commitment—as well as more of a face-saving feature for the recipient, who could ignore you without hurting your feelings. He was plausibly away from the house, after all.

I was the last person I know to get a cell phone. I purchased my first on April 28, 2012, which I remember because I got married on April 21, 2012. Before I owned it, I used to ask people why they texted when they could call and speak to a live human. I learned the answer quickly: so as to not speak to a live human. Life is busy; texting is efficient.

A couple of years ago I inquired gingerly of one of my grown progeny: “In your opinion, do parents of adult children tend to overdo it or underdo it in terms of texting their children?” “Overdo it,” she said. Then we both pretended the question had been hypothetical, and moved on.

The “group text” is an instructive phenomenon. On the occasions that I have been included in such a thread, in which the other participants are my children, I have noticed that text comments made by any one of them are instantly responded to by all of the other siblings. My text comments, on the other hand, though as amusing as the others, languish in silence till I grow as embarrassed as Eglon’s servant in Judges 3:24. Which I think I am meant to take note of. But I could just be paranoid.

I know a woman who for decades thought she was “a bother.” That identity affected every action of her day, including phone conversations with her children, which she always cut short before the other person had a chance to do so: “Jump before you’re pushed.” Then she went to Christian counseling and changed her mantra from “I’m a bother” to “I’m a blessing,” on the rightly reasoned notion that a Christian is not an annoyance but an ambassador of light.

I’m glad it worked for Michelle, but I might still be lying low in cyberspace for the most part till I get more positive feedback. This is not so much self-protective as respectful of another Bible verse that comes into play past a certain point in parent-child relations: “a man shall leave his father and mother…” (Genesis 2:24). I wonder how Moses got on with Gershom and Eliezer.
Never a catch
SEIZE THE MOMENT ... WHILE YOU STILL CAN

Two months ago the announcement brought back many memories. Next Aug. 13 in Dyersville, Iowa, the Chicago White Sox and the New York Yankees will play a regular season game at a most irregular place: the site where Kevin Costner starred in *Field of Dreams* (1989).

I’ve watched it many times. If asked to name my favorite movie, I might say *The Great Escape* or *The Right Stuff*, but my wife tells me to fess up: *It’s Field of Dreams*. Flawed though the movie is in many ways, it always chokes me up. Although called “a baseball flick,” the underlying motif is father-son relationships. At the end, Costner’s character asks his dad, “You wanna have a catch?”

My lifetime catches with my father: zero. He had no interest in baseball. I never played until I was 11. At that point I was a fat kid with a lazy left eye, so my batting average during one year of Little League was .182, if I generously count as hits what were probably errors.

Still, I wanted to be at least a decent fielder, so I nagged my father to come out on the street and throw me some ground balls. I said “street” because we lived in urban Massachusetts and had no backyard or nearby green space, which meant a missed ball would go rolling and rolling—and that contributed to the missed opportunity.

One day, finally, my father agreed. We stood in front of the house in which we had an apartment. I walked 20 yards away. He threw me a ball that bounced twice before it should have hit my glove—and I missed it. Embarrassed, and blaming my father rather than myself, I ran after it and yelled over my shoulder something like, “Why don’t you throw it straight?”

When I picked up the ball and turned around, he was walking up the steps to our front door. He went inside. That was it. We never again even started at catch. Nor did we talk much—and once I became a teenager, we spoke hardly at all.

Cut to October 1984. I was 34. He was 67—and dying of bladder cancer. I lived 2,000 miles away and flew to Boston with the public goal of providing some comfort and help, but my private motive was selfish: to learn why he had moved from brilliant youth just before World War II to postwar failure, at least in the eyes of my mother, decade after decade. That was a mystery.

One evening we sat on a Danish modern couch in their apartment. After some perfunctory remarks I threw him a question about his dropping out of graduate school. The question was harder and curvier than a polite inquiry should have been. He got up and walked away, saying over his shoulder something like, “Why don’t you mind your own business?”

I put away the conversational ball and went to sleep. The next day I asked no more questions. My father and mother drove me to Boston’s Logan Airport. He wore a baseball cap because chemotherapy had left him bald. I pulled my suitcase out of the trunk, shook his hand, leaned over, and whispered in his ear, “I love you,” because that seemed the right thing to say to a dying parent.

I never saw him again. I wish I had persisted in my questioning. I should not have so readily given up, both for true love and to gain true family history.

This month of October is the 35th anniversary of our nonconversation. Several years ago I interrogated surviving relatives and obtained some old records, so now I have a theory about my father’s change, but the mind-witness is long gone. In the magic of *Field of Dreams*, the son and the dad finally have a catch. That catches my tears, every time.

What’s the takeaway for parents and children, as they anticipate get-togethers at Thanksgiving next month? Have a catch, or a family touch football game. (Or tackle, if you must.) And at Christmas? Talk with each other while you still can, and thank God for wiping away tears.
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